

New CEO transforming The Cochrane Collaboration

The Cochrane Collaboration offices are small. If you have ever been to Summerstown in Oxford, United Kingdom, chances are you passed them without even knowing. Standing outside their modestly sized single-floor office makes you wonder just how they wield such clout.

As producers of over 5500 systematic reviews, with 500 paid staff and over 28 000 volunteers and contributors, the collaboration's work is seen as an essential component of evidence-based medicine and health policy that helps guide doctors' decision-making worldwide. Leading them is their recently appointed CEO, 49-year-old Mark Wilson.

Since coming to the position eight months ago, Wilson has been busy revamping Cochrane's strategy. His current priority is establishing a team and expanding the central executive, with the aim of providing better support for members and increasing capacity to meet goals that will ultimately see more reviews people want, delivered in a timely manner.

"Organizationally, Cochrane realized after 20 years they need to professionalize as a major international organization," says Wilson. "We are a vast organization, still being managed in an ad hoc hand-to-mouth sort of way. To be ready for the next 20 years, we need to be transformed."

At the heart of the transformation remains the product — the Cochrane reviews — which Wilson holds in high esteem. What makes a Cochrane review so special compared to other systematic reviews, he says, is its methodological rigour and the high quality work of its many contributors.

Still, he is quick to point out obstacles that need to be overcome, one being the many months, sometimes years, that it takes some groups and authors to finish a review. "We have been criticized for that." Cochrane is reviewing its production processes and looking at new ways to ensure standardization.



Elizabeth Wilson

Mark Wilson, a former journalist, is bringing organizational know-how and managerial acumen to his new job as CEO of The Cochrane Collaboration.

"Also, we've been accused of having high-quality output, but not answering the right questions that people are asking. Part of our quality-assurance processes should take this into account. If not, we're something of a vanity exercise."

Over the next five years, Cochrane will spend its \$6.26-million reserve from general revenue, national licensing and institutional subscriptions on achieving these goals. Wilson says the Collaboration has been "prudent" about its operational costs, which has allowed it to set aside about \$3.13 million a year, so it can "change and grow."

With open-access publishing, these are critical times financially for the organization, but Wilson has lots of ideas, ranging from new products, such as systematic review summaries that will be pay-to-view, to translating existing reviews into many languages to expand their appeal.

Clearly, Wilson is a man of many ideas. But a man with a master's degree in international politics and a journalist by training may seem an odd choice as CEO of the Collaboration. However, early on, Wilson moved sideways in publishing from writer to communications director. Since 1993, he worked in

operations and development at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Geneva, Switzerland, .

By 2004, he was back in London as CEO of Panos London, an international developmental organization focusing on developing media and communication technology in the developing world. Does he miss journalism? "It's been a long time since I've written anything. I enjoyed it, but much prefer what I do now."

Wilson's predecessor, Nick Royle, stepped down in January 2012 due to family illness after nine years in the top job. Recruiting his replacement took nine months.

"We were looking for someone who understood the global not-for-profit sector and someone who was comfortable dealing with an international organization," says Dr. Jeremy Grimshaw, the director of the Canadian Cochrane Centre, who helped to interview Wilson. Cochrane also needed someone with a strong management and administration background. "Wilson easily ticks those boxes."

Birgitte Jallof, a former colleague at Panos London, agrees Wilson will shine, particularly as a manager. "He'll know how to make that work," says Jallof.

Eyebrows may rise when the realization kicks in that someone with no health care experience is now leading one of the foremost organizations dedicated to ensuring good clinical decisions. But Grimshaw was candid about why a nonphysician was chosen,

"We have many scientific readers in Cochrane — many of whom have clinical backgrounds. They can represent the Collaboration from those perspectives easily. We needed someone to provide a strong, enabling infrastructure that will support our 28 000 people around the world. Academics are not often good at strategic thinking, management and organizational issues. We needed someone to plug that gap." — Neil Chanchlani MD, London, UK

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