

## **Cochrane Colloquia: Proposal for a review**

*Paper prepared by Steve McDonald and Jordi Pardo, CPAC Co-Convenors,  
on behalf of the Colloquium Policy Advisory Committee, 21st February 2011*

### **Purpose**

To outline the rationale for conducting a review of Colloquia; to propose the review's purpose, scope and timelines.

### **Urgency**

Medium.

### **Access**

Open.

### **Background**

The Cochrane Colloquium is the principal meeting of the Collaboration and its members, and fulfils both a scientific and a business function. Despite being held annually since 1993, there has never been a wide-ranging review of the purpose, format or organisation of Colloquia. In typically Cochrane fashion, things have evolved over time in an ad hoc rather than planned way.

Unusually for scientific societies, the responsibility for organising Colloquia and the associated financial costs and risks involved have been borne, not by the Collaboration, but by Centres (mostly) that have hosted each meeting. Given the enormity of the task, the achievement of Colloquium organisers has been remarkable; Colloquia are not straightforward meetings, and organisers who take on the responsibility do not necessarily have event management experience. Looking ahead, organisers are faced with further complexity in scheduling and logistics, while at the same time trying to ensure that Colloquia remain relevant and satisfy the diverse needs of the Collaboration's multiple constituents and stakeholders.

Colloquium organisers, with the support of the Colloquium Policy Advisory Committee, do their best to improve Colloquia from year to year by refining processes and trying out new things, but inevitably this is done within the constraints of the current model. As the Collaboration looks forward to marking its 20<sup>th</sup> Colloquium in 2012, we believe the time is right to carry out a review of all aspects of the purpose, role and management of Colloquia, to ensure they continue to best serve the interests of the Collaboration and its members into the future.

There is one note of caution we wish to add: a review is not without its own risks. Colloquia have a distinct social and intellectual richness that is cherished by those who attend regularly. They are also dependent on good will from many who willingly pay their way in spite of their varied contributions. Any review should consider what might be lost if a more centralised, uniform model was adopted.

### **Rationale for a review of Colloquia**

The basic format and model of organising Colloquia have changed little over the years, despite significant changes to the Collaboration since its inception. While retaining regular features in the

Colloquium format is a way of maintaining continuity, we may be missing out on opportunities to make better use of Colloquium time.

In particular, there are several factors that have prompted this recommendation for a review:

1. It is not always clear what the real purpose of the Colloquium is, and there is often a tension between meeting the needs of internal contributors and reaching out to an external audience. The danger is that organisers try to cater to both audiences without fully satisfying either.
2. The Colloquium Policy Advisory Committee has developed standard operating procedures for many aspects of Colloquium management, and has also sought to transfer responsibility for management of some of these to the Secretariat (e.g. stipends, sponsored entity registrations, annual awards and prizes, Annual General Meeting, Cochrane Exchange, webcasting) to alleviate the burden on local organisers. However, the CPAC's focus is on ensuring that policies are followed and knowledge exchange is facilitated between organisers; it has no remit to determine the strategic purposes of the Colloquium.
3. Although the Collaboration and the Steering Group have been the subject of strategic reviews, the role of Colloquia has not been discussed by the Collaboration. As an organisation, it would be timely to look at what we're doing, what we could be doing differently, identify those things which are worth preserving, and dispense with those that are redundant.
4. The growth of the Collaboration in the last three to four years, particularly coinciding with the creation of the Cochrane Editorial Unit and additional centrally funded personnel and initiatives, has resulted in a greater demand for protected time for meetings outside of the traditional scientific program of plenaries, workshops and papers.
5. At the same time, the science of systematic reviewing and aligned areas of research, such as knowledge translation and implementation, have evolved considerably and attract researchers and practitioners from many different spheres, perhaps with different expectations and needs than the traditional Colloquium audience.
6. Appraisal of the sustainability of the current model, whereby Centres volunteer to take on the lion's share of the task of organising a Colloquium.

### **Suggested scope and terms of reference of review**

#### **A. Scope**

1. *Purposes (primary and secondary) of Cochrane Colloquia*
  - expectations of different stakeholders (Collaboration, active Cochrane contributors, potential contributors, local organisers, etc.)
  - consideration of competing interests in achieving purposes (i.e. internal versus external; science versus business)
2. *Practical and logistical factors*
  - format (overall mix of plenaries, workshops, papers and meetings)
  - frequency (annual, biannual, alternate models in alternate years, tie in with regional meetings, overlap with a related conference, etc.)
  - duration (4 days, 5 days, inclusion of pre-Colloquium days, free afternoon, etc.)
  - location (policy of regional rotation, type of venue, accessibility)
  - use of e-technologies to promote remote participation (live web streaming) and reduce resource use (e.g. abstract book on handhelds, etc.)
  - environmental impact of Colloquia (factors contributing to environmental impact, targets for reducing impact, strategies organisers and participants could be encouraged to implement)
  - minimum program requirements (e.g. meeting times for entities, inclusion of specific sessions, etc.)

- consideration of viability and/or format of specific sessions (e.g. Opening Plenary, Meet the Entities, AGM)
- plenary presenters (consideration of ratios of women and men, people from LMICs and other nations, consumers and non-consumers, etc.)

### 3. *Organisational issues*

- model of organisation: central (Secretariat), local (Cochrane Centre or Group), hybrid, etc.
- role of professional conference organisers
- Colloquium Manager system (purpose, ownership/copyright, funding, responsibility for)
- funding for Colloquia (incl. review of sponsored entity registrations and Colloquium sponsorship policy)
- Stipends (purpose, value, management, etc.)

### 4. *Business / commercial opportunities*

- Colloquium Manager as a potential product
- event management on behalf of other Cochrane and non-Cochrane groups

## **B. Approach**

The review could be modelled on the 2008-09 Cochrane Collaboration Strategic Review, with a small review team using mixed methods to gather feedback (e.g. surveys of entities/members; feedback through discussion forums; interviews with internal and external stakeholders) and make recommendations. There is also a rich source of data from the evaluations of previous Colloquia. Part of the intelligence gathering could also include an assessment of external trends in conference organisation, use of technologies, innovations used by other conferences/organisations, etc.

## **C. Review leaders/team**

The current CPAC Co-Convenors have been closely involved in the key decisions affecting Colloquia and have many years of experience to draw on, as do many past/present members of CPAC. Although we are happy to contribute to the review, we feel the review would benefit from being led by someone with an external perspective who could bring fresh thinking and ideas, i.e. someone not currently (or in recent times) immersed in organising a Colloquium.

The review leader would need to be very familiar with the Collaboration (understand the growing challenge in meeting both the science and business needs) and a regular participant at Colloquia and other conferences. Someone who is tech-savvy and able to foresee the practical application of new trends would also be useful.

## **D. Timeline**

Subject to the review's approval by the Steering Group in Split, the review panel would form, and the scope, process and timeline for the review could be approved before Madrid. The Madrid Colloquium could be used as one consultation forum, with final recommendations being submitted for consideration at the mid-year meeting in Paris in April 2012.

NB. The Nanning Colloquium organisers are already reasonably advanced in their planning, so there shouldn't be any expectation of radical changes for 2012. It would be very much up to the Quebec organisers to decide what recommendations could be incorporated in time for the 2013 Colloquium.

## **Resource implications**

Conducting an effective review will need adequate resourcing. The scale of this will depend on the review format chosen, and the team selected, but following the Strategic Review format, this will require protected time for the review leader, project support, administrative support, plus perhaps some incidental costs. Project and administrative support can be provided from within the Secretariat. Once a review leader is chosen, and the scale of their involvement agreed, a firmer figure for cost can be derived.

**Impact statement**

Cochrane Colloquia play a key role in sustaining the vitality of The Cochrane Collaboration and the enthusiasm of its members. They also represent considerable investment in terms of resources and people's time. A review would assess what improvements could be made to the current model to ensure that Colloquia remain fit-for-purpose.

**Decision required**

Yes, to approve or otherwise the recommendation to undertake a review of Cochrane Colloquia; to provide feedback on the proposed terms of reference and practical aspects of conducting the review.