

# SOUTH AFRICAN COCHRANE CENTRE NEWSLETTER

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## SACC hosts a knight!

On 17 and 18 October 2001, the South African Cochrane Centre was privileged to co-host the South African visit of Sir Iain Chalmers along with the University of Stellenbosch's Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology. Iain Chalmers founded the Cochrane Collaboration in 1993 and is currently Director of the UK Cochrane Centre. He was in South Africa to receive an honorary fellowship from the South African College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in recognition of his enormous contribution to evidence-based practice in the field of reproductive health care.

During his brief 48 hours in Cape Town, Sir Iain found the time to visit the Centre and spend informal time with staff before attending the Centre's monthly review problem-busting session. These sessions allow reviewers an opportunity to present their review progress to their peers and to receive feedback. Twenty keen reviewers attended the session and Dr Haly Holmes gave an excellent presentation on her review titled *Interventions for preventing and treating oral Candidiasis in people with HIV*. Sir Iain was able to provide useful

advice and prompted a thought-provoking discussion. The session was followed by a tea where Dr Jimmy Volmink, previous director of the Centre, spoke warmly of Sir Iain's association with South Africa and the instrumental role he had played in establishing the Centre in 1997.

Later that day, after giving a lecture at the University of Stellenbosch, a group of SACC staff accompanied Sir Iain to the formal award ceremony held at Jameson Hall at the University of Cape Town. During the ceremony, colleague and friend Prof. Jack Moodley described Sir Iain as "an international figure of great repute, but ... the epitome of humbleness". All those who met Sir Iain during his brief stay would certainly agree and look forward to another - longer - visit next time!

*Nandi Siegfried  
Acting Director  
SACC*



*From left: Elizabeth Pienaar, Louise Spruyt, Martie Muller, Jimmy Volmink, Sir Iain Chalmers, Prof. Hein Odendaal, Nandi Siegfried and Prof. Jack Moodley at the award ceremony.*

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## SAMJ to co-publish Cochrane reviews

We are delighted to announce that the Editorial Board of the *South African Medical Journal (SAMJ)* has agreed to co-publication of Cochrane reviews (new and updates) in the journal, an arrangement that is similar to *The Lancet* editorial policy that was announced in the middle of last year. The

*SAMJ* announcement is contained in the January issue of the journal (*SAMJ* 2002; 92 (1):1). We encourage all reviewers to consider submitting their reviews for publication in the *SAMJ* in order to promote dissemination of reviews to a wider audience in South Africa and beyond.

## The Cochrane Collaboration and developing countries

The production of Cochrane reviews is dependent on the flow of information between various people and places. Since the establishment of the Collaboration in 1993, several tools and systems have been developed to help to facilitate the electronic production and publication of systematic reviews. All of these tools make up the Information Management System. This system covers the review writing software (RevMan), the software used to compile information for submission to Update Software for publication on The Cochrane Library, as well as a contacts database. The planning and development of the system is the responsibility of the Information Management System Group (IMSG).

Until recently developing countries had no representation on the group. This has now changed with the recent appointment of myself, Elizabeth Pienaar, as developing country representative to the IMSG and the RevMan Advisory Group. In this capacity I have been asked to draw up a plan for how people in developing countries, where information technology is not as readily available as in the USA and

Europe, can be better involved in the activities of the Cochrane Collaboration.

To facilitate this process the different barriers and obstacles that prevent people from developing or low-resourced countries from participating need to be identified and possible solutions found. This process will be done in two phases with phase one consisting of a needs assessment and phase two being the development of possible solutions. In order for me to get all of this done I will be contacting many of you either via e-mail or the more traditional snail-mail asking for opinions on a number of issues.

This is the chance for Cochranites from developing countries to make their voices heard, so when the time comes shout and I'll listen to the needs expressed!

*Elizabeth Pienaar*  
Information Scientist  
[epienaar@mrc.ac.za](mailto:epienaar@mrc.ac.za)

# Mini finishing school for systematic reviews

In December last year we were very fortunate to be able to host Dr Andy Oxman from the Norwegian Cochrane Centre for a return visit to the SACC. Andy spent a 3-month sabbatical with us at the end of 2000 and one of his big contributions was a weekly session for potential systematic reviewers during which he helped us to formulate our protocols. Last year we asked Andy to take this one step forward and to do a 'Mini Finishing School for systematic reviews'. These sessions ran daily for 3 days from 08h30 to 12h30 and addressed systematic reviews. A condition of attendance was that the attendee would have a title registered for his/her systematic review and ideally would have a complete protocol.

Sixteen people attended the mini finishing school. Most of the reviewers were local, we were also joined by Dr Kate Grimwade from the London School of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene who is presently working at Hlabisa Hospital in KwaZulu-Natal and Dr Fathima Mahomed Paruk from the University of Natal MRC Pregnancy and Hypertension Research Unit.

Our youngest attendee was Alice Wood who accompanied her mother, Juliet Wood each day as she was being breastfed. We at the SACC are enormously proud of the fact that Andy Oxman and all present were very happy to have both Alice and Juliet attend. A big thank you to our two SACC ladies, Joy Oliver and Bernadette Bredekamp, who took turns 'hosting' Alice in their offices and in their arms whenever Juliet needed a break. We hope that if Alice is exposed to systematic reviews this early in life, we can look forward to a long and fruitful association with her!

*Louise Spruyt  
Senior Scientist  
SACC*

*Dr Andy Oxman (above)*

*Alice Wood, youngest attendee at the mini finishing school.*

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# A Midsummer Night's Dream –

Cape Town Airport. For me these few words hold a multitude of emotions. A mixture of adventure, excitement, promise, joy, sadness, leaving behind and stretching forward. I was standing in the space-age style, grand International Departures Hall on 1 June 2001. This time I was not leaving for a visit to family or friends, an orchestral tour or a backpacking holiday. I was on my way to work and train in England for two months! Something I've dreamt of since I was a student.

The Department for International Development UK through the Effectiveness Health Care Alliance Programme, co-ordinated by the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine had offered me a fellowship to obtain training in the United Kingdom in the field of meta-analysis. This is part of an effort to build statistical capacity at the South African Cochrane Centre (SACC).

A systematic review and meta-analysis of male circumcision and risk of HIV infection in sub-Saharan Africa had recently been published<sup>1</sup>, and the task to 'Cochranise' this review was up for grabs. After much debate the SACC decided to take on this project to form the basis of my training. Nandi Siegfried would lead the review, I would work by her side, Jimmy Volmink would resolve any 'fights' (fortunately for him we had few, if any) and we assembled a group of knowledgeable co-reviewers – who all happened to be from the UK. A visit to the UK in January 2001 had given me the opportunity to meet the co-reviewers and the advisory board members. We had discussed the published review, refined the draft protocol and investigated the possibilities of an individual patient data (IPD) analysis.

My objectives for June and July were threefold: QA, IPD and MA. Let me explain. With the help of co-reviewers Paula Williamson, Jon Deeks, Matthias Egger and Nicola Low we developed and piloted a quality assessment (QA) tool for observational studies in the HIV circumcision Cochrane review<sup>2</sup>. During this time I continued with data extraction (often on the train somewhere between

Liverpool, London, Bristol and Oxford!) Secondly, Paula Williamson of the University of Liverpool (Department of Mathematical Sciences) took me under her wing to learn the process and statistical techniques involved in individual patient data (IPD) analysis. We worked on the Cochrane review:

*Oxcarbazepine versus phenytoin monotherapy for epilepsy* with Tony Marson from the Cochrane Epilepsy group. My days were filled with data:

Exploring data, contacting the pharmaceutical company with questions about data, setting data up in the correct format and analysing data! Catrin Tudur helped me to become familiar with SHARP software. Thirdly, I attended *Methods of Meta-analysis (MA) and other Statistical Issues in Systematic Reviews* at the University of Oxford, organised by the Oxford Systematic Review Development Programme. This week-long course was an excellent opportunity to learn about the statistics involved in meta-analysis of Cochrane reviews, the use of STATA, and to network with Cochrane statisticians from all over the world. We had lots of fun sharing in Oxford culture: Punting along the river (and pinting before punting back!) and joining in the summer-only 'Shakespeare in the garden' (we nearly froze to death!)



*Martie Muller & Jonathan Sterne*



*Catrin Tudur Smith, Martie Muller, Paula Williamson, Nandi Siegfried and Steve Taylor at the University of Liverpool.*



*Looking out for the*

# Cochrane training in England



*punting on the river Isis, Oxford.*

I had the unexpected opportunity to present at the Liverpool Medical Statistics meeting about the work we do in the Biostatistics Unit (MRC-SA) on Generalised Estimating Equation modelling of substance use in schools. Informal discussions with colleagues and students added to my list of valuable experiences.

I had the added luxury of being a tourist in England and Scotland over weekends! What a wonderful experience to explore the gardens of Hampton Court Palace, attend Wimbledon (after waiting in the queue from 6am for 6 hours! Yes, of course, we ate strawberries and cream!), and visiting Cream (those young

enough will know!). My colleagues treated me to a much longed for 'braaivleis' (with SA wine!) and a stunning hike in the Lake District (we had to first 'hike' through three disinfectants to protect us from spreading foot and mouth disease). I spent hours walking around the Liverpool Tate Gallery and Port Sunlight, and took the ferry across the Mersey! Not to mention Scotland, camping in the majestic mountains of the Highlands and on the Isle of Mull, swimming in Fingle's cave on Staffa: I stood in awe of the bewildering beauty.

My summer in the UK was extremely valuable, especially in networking with Cochrane Statisticians in Liverpool, co-reviewers in

the UK and other Cochrane Statisticians from all over the world. I learnt about the process and analysis involved in IPD meta-analyses and could continue working on the HIV-circumcision review with valuable input from UK-based co-reviewers. To everyone who was and is involved in my training: Thank you! I appreciate your involvement and encouragement.

Cape Town Airport, 31 July 2001. Winter! (not too different from summer in the north). Behind me was a mixture of adventure, excitement, promise, joy, sadness and leaving behind: Two months of rich and valuable experience, and interaction with new colleagues and friends. Now it was time to stretch forward and invest in South Africa and its people what others had invested in me. I was on my way to settle back to work and life in Africa! Something I've dreamt of since I was a student.

*Martie Muller*

*Collaborating Reviewer/ Statistician SACC and Scientist, Decision Support Domain Institute for Maritime Technology, Simon's Town*

## References

1. Weiss HA, Quigley MA, Hayes RJ. Male circumcision and risk of HIV infection in sub-Saharan Africa: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *AIDS* 2000, **14**: 2361-2370.
2. Siegfried N, Muller M, Volmink J, Egger M, Low N, Weiss H, Walker S, Deeks J, Williamson P. *Male circumcision for prevention of heterosexual transmission of HIV in men (Cochrane Protocol)*. The Cochrane Library 2001 Issue 4. Oxford, Update Software.
3. Muller M, Marson T, Williamson P. *Oxcarbazepine versus Phenytoin monotherapy for epilepsy*. Title registered with the Cochrane Epilepsy Review Group on 11 May 2001.



*Loch Ness monster.*



*Martie Muller.*

# 9<sup>th</sup> International Cochrane Colloquium

The 9<sup>th</sup> International Cochrane Colloquium was held in the beautiful city of Lyon in France from 9-13 October 2001. The theme for the Colloquium was *The evidence dissemination process: How to make it more efficient.*

Plenaries, workshops and presentations met the objectives of examining how systematic reviews could be effectively disseminated and used in evidence-based practice. They also created a forum for discussions of barriers to the production of evidence relevant to patient care and its implementation; and discussions about potential alliances among consumers, policy makers, administrators, clinical researchers, funders and industry in the health care arena.

We were pleased to see that issues pertaining to the developing world were also covered. The scientific programme was complemented by a welcome reception in the Town Hall with its Roman Baroque decorations, a non-randomised dinner and a free afternoon with the choice of several excursions or the petanque (form of bowls, played on rough ground with metal balls) competition.

The SACC was represented at the colloquium by three staff members who participated in the scientific programme.

Dr Nandi Siegfried conducted a workshop in collaboration with the HIV/AIDS group and the Infectious Disease Group about how to develop a structured mentoring programme for new reviewers from resource-poor settings. Ms Elizabeth Pienaar introduced delegates to the African Trials Register, a database that was born at the SACC, which aims to contribute to evidence-based decision making and raise awareness of clinical effectiveness research conducted in Africa. Ms Victoria Pillay presented a poster on a review conducted on *The quality of randomised controlled trials on TB done in South Africa between 1994 and 1998.* In addition, SACC honorary staff member, Prof. George Swingler reflected on how the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews related to the global burden of disease in his poster entitled *Do Cochrane reviews reflect the global burden of disease?*

We would like to commend the French Cochrane Centre for hosting a successful Colloquium.

*Victoria Pillay  
Research Trainee  
SACC*



*Arild Bjørndal, Chris Silagy, Nandi Siegfried, Mingming Zang, Li He, Iain Chalmers at the centre staff dinner.*

# WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

## Are you made of mentor material?

The South African Cochrane Centre (SACC) and the Cochrane HIV/AIDS Group are currently seeking *experienced reviewers* to act as mentors in an exciting new initiative. The HIV/AIDS Mentoring Programme kicked off in October 2000 with the main aim of increasing the number of Cochrane reviews relevant to HIV/AIDS in resource-poor settings, particularly sub-Saharan Africa. Novice reviewers from the region are paired with a more experienced reviewer and also receive regular mentorship from staff of the SACC. So far, seven new reviewers have been recruited through this scheme and demand is growing. We cannot grow this programme without your assistance. *We need you to join this initiative and become a mentor.*

## What we want from you

Historically, South Africa has trained from five to ten times more white than black postgraduates in the scientific fields. Research as a career was not an obvious choice for black school leavers and graduates mainly due to inequalities in the previous education system and inadequate financial resources. This programme creates an opportunity for promising young graduates to develop their skills, receive hands-on training and experience, and explore opportunities for pursuing a career as a researcher in the health sciences (extracted from the *MRC Research Training Internship Programme Policy Document, 1998*).

We are looking for committed Cochranites who can offer:

- methodological experience (no need to be an HIV expert – most of our reviewers deal with HIV daily in their practices);
- regular e-mail contact and once monthly e-mail chats with the reviewers;
- willingness to train people with limited epidemiological skills;
- willingness to work with people who do not speak English as their first language; and,
- willingness to provide support and advice throughout the review process

A structured protocol development programme is available which can be tailored to the needs of the individual mentor and the reviewers. Mentors are not expected to act as co-reviewers unless this is desirable for both parties.

## What you get from us

You stand to gain an exciting opportunity to:

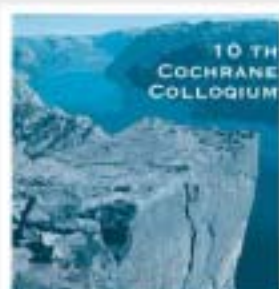
- interact with people battling to care for consumers with HIV/AIDS on a daily basis;
- learn about a new culture;
- experience new reviewers' enthusiasm and eagerness to learn;
- recognise that your contribution can make a difference at an individual and global level; and,
- fulfil the 10<sup>th</sup> Cochrane principle of enabling wide participation.

**What have you got to lose? Send us 100 – 200 words on why you would make a good mentor and a list of your previous Cochrane involvement. We look forward to hearing from you!**  
e-mail: [cochrane@mrc.ac.za](mailto:cochrane@mrc.ac.za); Fax: +27 21 938 0836

## SACC Training Workshops

Date	Type of Workshop	Venue / City
2 May 2002	EBHC Training workshop	MRC, Cape Town
13 May 2002	EBHC Training workshop	MRC, Pretoria
9 October 2002	EBHC Training workshop	FS Medical School, Bloemfontein
10 October 2002	EBHC Training workshop	Durban (venue to be confirmed)
15 October 2002	EBHC Training workshop	MRC, Cape Town

## The 10<sup>th</sup> International Cochrane Colloquium



For more information:

Tel: 0947 22042562  
 Fax: 0947 22042595  
 e-mail: [colloquium@cochrane.no](mailto:colloquium@cochrane.no)  
 Website: [www.cochrane.no](http://www.cochrane.no)



## The Cochrane Library: Internet versus CD-ROM

	Internet	CD-ROM
Search for words with fewer than 3 letters	Yes	No
Words in tables can be searched for	Yes	No
'Check boxes' beside each document title, allowing you to save and print selected documents	No	Yes
Import and export search strategies to/from your PC	No	Yes
Reviewers' Handbook and Glossary included	No	Yes
Computer with Internet access	Yes	No

Please note that the content of The Cochrane Library on the Internet is identical to that of the CD-ROM version.

## SACC Team building

All staff of the SACC spent 2 memorable days learning about themselves and each other in a team-building session in the beautiful Noordhoek Valley in late January 2002. We look forward to repeating the experience in the future.  
 "The exercise in general was enjoyable

and a great learning curve for me, however, we need to sort out underlying issues which could hamper the progress of becoming a 'world class' unit."  
 "It was a good experience – it showed that we can function as a team!"

"The treasure walk was great fun and definitely the highlight."  
 "This showed that life – and work – can be a beach after all!"  
 "I enjoyed the experience. I also felt quite drained after it all. Slept 12 hours Tuesday night."



*SACC staff relaxing on Noordhoek beach after the treasure hunt.*



*Louise Spruyt, Joy Oliver & Fay Mabomed  
 Winners of the 'Eiffel Tower' Competition.*



Medical Research Council  
 PO Box 19070 Tygerberg, South Africa. Francie van Zijl Drive, Parow Valley, Cape Town.  
**Contact the South African Cochrane Centre at:**  
 e-mail: [cochrane@mrc.ac.za](mailto:cochrane@mrc.ac.za) Tel: +27 (0) 21 938 0438 Fax: +27 (0) 21 938 0836