

Identifying stakeholders for the Cochrane Cancer Network

Eve Tomlinson, NIHR Network Support Fellow for the Cochrane Cancer Network, describes a recent stakeholder mapping project for the six Cancer Cochrane Review Groups.

The [Cochrane Cancer Network](#) supports the work of six Cochrane Review Groups (CRGs): [Breast Cancer](#), [Childhood Cancer](#), [Gynaecological](#), [Neuro-oncology and Orphan Cancers](#), [Haematology](#), [Lung Cancer](#) and [Urology](#). The CRGs in the Cancer Network provide robust evidence required to make important decisions on issues concerning cancer and related topics.

Throughout the review production process, the CRGs in the Cancer Network work with stakeholders such as patients, policy makers, health care professionals, researchers and guideline developers. Stakeholder engagement in systematic reviews helps to ensure that relevant research questions are identified and the outcomes of interest to review end-users are included. Involving end-users from target audiences can also help to improve their acceptance of Cochrane reviews. Their involvement may increase the likelihood of co-production of future reviews and lead to support in the dissemination of review evidence. This all increases the likelihood of Cochrane reviews being used in clinical decision making.

Stakeholder engagement was highlighted as important in the Cancer Network [Strategic Work Plan](#). In addition, Network members said that they would like to know more about other Cancer Network CRGs' relationships with stakeholders, and to think about how the Network could improve stakeholder engagement. We therefore scoped a project to:

- 1) **share information about CRGs' existing relationships with stakeholders (including funders) between the Cancer Network's CRGs, and;**
- 2) **use the stakeholder information from CRGs as the basis for a mapping project to identify potential new stakeholders for Cancer CRGs and the Network overall.**

Stage 1: Survey of CRGs' relationships with stakeholders and funders, and sharing this information across the Network

In August 2019, we surveyed all Cancer Network CRGs to determine their current and desired stakeholders (including funders) and learn more about their experiences of stakeholder engagement. Questions about funders were included because previous talks with Cancer CRGs had highlighted that the acquisition of funding was something the Network could help support. As the topic coverage of funders and stakeholders are often intrinsically linked, we took the opportunity to gain information about funders to inform a future stream of work to help the sustainability of Cancer CRGs.

Survey findings were presented to Cancer Network CRGs in November 2019. We found that:

- Most Cancer CRGs have multiple stakeholders with whom they are involved in different projects including: prioritisation, dissemination, guideline development and commissioned research. Some of these partnerships involve funding for the CRG, others are unpaid. Most CRGs do not work continuously with their stakeholders but do so on a project basis.
- CRGs highlighted struggles with engaging with new stakeholders and with larger stakeholder organisations in their respective host countries.
- A common theme amongst CRGs was that their stakeholder relationships, particularly with charities, could be improved. Five (of six) CRGs gave ideas of stakeholders they would like to

Stage 2: The Cancer Network Stakeholder Mapping Project

In October 2019, I progressed to the second aim of the project. In the absence of clear guidance and literature, colleagues within Cochrane were able to provide some advice. Audrey Tan (Network Support Fellow for the Circulation and Breathing Network) shared experience of mapping stakeholders in their Network and this framed our approach. A useful [stakeholder mapping approach](#) from the Business for Social Responsibility was available on the [Cochrane KT Resources webpages](#). I also joined the KT mentoring scheme. My mentor helped me to visualise the end point of the project and work backwards, thinking about specific time points and milestones.

We aimed to create a stakeholder map consisting of new stakeholders for each CRG and the Network overall in order to facilitate stakeholder engagement in review production and knowledge translation activities in the Cancer Network. To do this we:

- 1) Added the information about CRGs current and desired stakeholders from the aforementioned survey to collate a 'stakeholder map' for each CRG. This was presented a simple Excel spreadsheet.
- 2) Searched guidelines using guideline information sent by Cochrane UK, in which CRGs' reviews had been cited between 2017 and 2019, to find participating stakeholders. We incorporated these organisations and individuals into the stakeholder map.
- 3) Searched the mapped stakeholders online to find, Twitter presence, organisation type, audience and location. This also led to further stakeholder suggestions via the 'Recommended for you' function on Twitter.
- 4) Collated stakeholders common across CRGs into a combined Network stakeholder map.
- 5) Emailed each CRG their stakeholder map and used that to start a discussion about stakeholder relevance, alignment of priorities and feasibility of connection with each CRG. This discussion led to further iteration and edits of the CRG stakeholder maps.

What did we find?

From doing this project we have found that, as expected, there are numerous organisations and individuals working towards common goals in cancer research across the world. We have identified over 180 stakeholders, of which 63 are charities. Together these organisations have over 7.8m Twitter followers and they are located in over 15 different countries. This information is displayed in a stakeholder map for each CRG and the Network overall.

What's next?

Having identified the stakeholders and created stakeholder maps, we plan to use this to inform plans to increase stakeholder partnerships in the Cancer Network. For example, two CRGs have used the stakeholder maps to a plan priority setting exercise and a dissemination strategy for a suite of reviews. Moving forward, the Network plans to work with more CRGs to use the stakeholder maps to facilitate engagement. We will also use the Network stakeholder map and think about how we can develop strategic partnerships with stakeholders at the Network level that are beneficial to multiple CRGs in our Network.

Summary

CRGs in Cochrane recognise that stakeholder engagement is beneficial throughout the review process. However, limited time and resources can be a barrier to identifying and engaging with stakeholders. The full Network project outlined here took five months. The method is simple and easy to replicate, and for individual CRGs it would likely take less time. We are confident that this project will support Cancer CRGs with stakeholder engagement by identifying relevant stakeholders but we acknowledge more time and effort will need to be invested in the development and continuation of new stakeholder relationships. We plan to evaluate our progress through informal discussion with CRGs about stakeholder engagement. We will also conduct a more formal evaluation in 12 months using the initial CRG survey as a baseline and a similar survey and/or interview, to assess how stakeholder engagement has progressed. We hope that sharing our experience will be helpful to other Cochrane Networks, CRGs, and any researchers who are also looking to identify stakeholders.

Take home points

- Stakeholder engagement in the production of Cochrane reviews is vital to ensure Cochrane evidence is relevant and useful to end-users. Identifying stakeholders is the necessary first step to stakeholder engagement.
- In the Cancer Network, a Network-wide stakeholder mapping project has identified over 180 stakeholders across six CRGs.
- So far, CRGs have used the stakeholder map to inform the planning of a priority setting exercise and a dissemination strategy. The Cancer Network will use the findings of this stakeholder mapping project to support increased stakeholder engagement by CRGs and the Network overall.

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Eve Tomlinson is the NIHR Network Support Fellow for the Cochrane Cancer Network. Eve works with the Network Senior Editor, Associate Editor and six Cancer Cochrane Review Groups to support the achievement of the objectives outlined in the Network's Strategic Plan. Eve supports Cancer Review Groups to run priority setting exercises to make sure the most relevant, high-priority Cancer topics are being addressed by the Network. Eve also supports the production of priority reviews, works on stakeholder engagement, supports the identification of funders and is improving the dissemination of Cochrane Cancer evidence.