

# A new approach to 'empty reviews'

**Kayleigh Kew and Emma Welsh – Cochrane Colloquium 2015**

We have no actual or potential conflict of interest in relation to this presentation

- 9% of Cochrane reviews are empty but vary hugely (Yaffe 2012)
- Discouraged but can be unavoidable – can you predict 0 RCTs?
- Long discussed in Cochrane – no consensus
- If a question is important , we need a way to make the most of the protocol and thorough search to:
  - Minimise additional effort
  - Publicise the research gap quickly
  - Maintain Cochrane methodology



**Cochrane**  
**Airways**



**St George's**  
University of London

# Current situation

- No specific guidance – expected to complete in RevMan and adhere to usual Cochrane processes
- Methods text usually amended to ‘we would have’, ‘we planned to’
- Mandatory results, abstract, discussion text, and empty SoF table
- Full peer review and copy-editing
- **48 weeks** (Airways median from protocol to publication since 2011)

No structural change required  
Search and editorial methods  
intact

Time-consuming for authors,  
editorial staff + peer reviewers  
Long delay in publishing a gap  
Long document - simple message



# Option 1: Streamlined review

- Protocol text unchanged – remain in future tense
- State ‘No included studies’ under all mandatory headings
- Short abstract and PICO suggestion – no discussion
- Quick publish – editorial sign off but no peer review or copy-edit

Search methods intact

Reduces workload and  
publicises the gap quickly

Easy to implement

Open to exploitation for an easy  
review

Editorial short-cuts



# Option 2: Amended protocol

- Document the search and no studies as a note
- Publish as 'amended protocol'

Search methods intact

Reduces workload and  
publicises the gap quickly

No full publication for authors –  
no incentive

Lack of transparency – minimal  
information about search



# Option 3: New review type

- Alternative structure to record only the search, excluded studies etc.
- Convert to the 'Empty' structure when no studies are found
- PICO implications for research fed directly to funders

Easier for authors and editorial staff

Easy to read – simple message

Documents research gap quickly

Structural change required in Archie/Cochrane may take years to agree and action

# VOTE!

	Cochrane methods intact?	↓ workload, publicises gap?	Easy to do with current tech?
Current situation	Yes	Inefficient	Yes – no change
1. Streamline review	Search methods yes, editorial no	Yes – some work but minimal	Yes – no change
2. Amended protocol	Yes, but difficult to document	Yes	Need to flag it as ‘special’
3. New review type	Yes	Yes	New structure required

Tell us what you think @CochraneAirways