

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

How to grab a headline: lots of smoke and little meat. (Response to Holmes *et al.*)

Dear Editor:

Reading the diatribe by Holmes and colleagues it was with some surprise that I learned that I am a microfascist. From what I understand from the rather confused and jargon-laden description that Holmes and colleagues give, I have come to gain this dubious honour from being a member of an 'all-encompassing scientific paradigm (postpositivism)', which 'comes to exclude alternative forms of knowledge': in other words I am a member of the Cochrane Collaboration.

The authors reach this conclusion on the basis of a mixture of imprecise use of terms and sheer falsehoods which belie the 'scholarly' tag given to their paper. Let me start my response by dealing with the myths and finish with the philosophical content. The Cochrane Library is not 'a collection of articles' but is a searchable resource which is organised in a structured fashion. At its core is the database of systematic reviews ('Cochrane reviews'). Cochrane reviews cover different topics and different disciplines. Readers can gain up-to-date synthetic knowledge of the effectiveness and harms of interventions as different as Echinacea for the common cold¹ and helmets to prevent injuries to motorcyclists.² Had Holmes and colleagues bothered to do their homework they would have discovered that some reviews are almost exclusively based on non-randomised evidence. An example is our review of the effects of influenza vaccines in the elderly. We included 96 datasets in the review, only 5 of which were from randomised controlled trials – so much for the 'dictatorship' of the randomised controlled trial.³

Holmes and colleagues in the rush to carry out an epistemological lynching of the Collaboration and its work have also missed some of its unique achievements. The first and perhaps most remarkable is the pluralistic quality of what we do. The Collaboration works as an international network whose sole purpose is to prepare and maintain systematic reviews. Over the years I (a doctor) have worked with biologists, engineers, librarians, nurses, statisticians, economists, members of the public, school children, journalists, physics graduates and homeopathic practitioners to prepare

Cochrane reviews. We do not care who you are or what your politics, ethnic background or job are. We do reviews.

I wonder if Holmes and colleagues are aware that our 'microfascist organisation' has an active consumer network and no Cochrane review or protocol are published without the comments of one of more consumers.

To my knowledge the Collaboration is the first of its kind to publish protocols, then the fully prepared review and then its regular updates. Once the review is published on the website anyone can send comments which must be answered within 6 months by the authors. The comments and the response are added to the review and represent a permanent record. Reviews are living research (our review of amantadine and rimantadine for influenza has just gone through its fourth update since first publication in 1999).⁴ Having all evidence synthesised and weighted by its quality should help any readers make informed choices, perhaps this is why Holmes and colleagues find our work so threatening.

Reviewers collaborate with one another, they do not compete, in an effort to maximise scarce resources. If two reviewers in different parts of the globe want to prepare a review on the same topic they are invited to collaborate, rather than duplicate their work. In the modern research world this is a revolution, as it changes radically our way of doing things. Instead of working in isolation competing for space on prestige journals, we have an international pluralistic network collaborating from the idea stage of a review. The concept of a monolithic organisation subverting science put forward by Holmes and colleagues made me giggle. A few years ago when we had the first of our periodic elections to select our representatives on the Cochrane Collaboration Steering Group there was quite a lengthy friendly debate on who was entitled to vote. You see, dear readers of this letter, we do not carry party cards and do not levy contributions from our members (however, defined).

The final myth: could the authors please point me to where I can get 'institutional promotions, accolades, public recognition and state contracts of all kinds'? In 13 years of systematic reviewing I have come across very few of these. The reality is a head-on collision between available evidence and people's prejudices, opinions and decisions.

Now to the philosophical part of the Holmes paper. In modern times from Bacon to Kuhn and Lakatos everyone agrees that the purpose of science is to better man's lot.⁵ The Collaboration does this in an epidemiological context which, although predominantly based on probabilistic induction, is compatible with falsificationsim, Kuhn paradigms of the evolution of science and in fact is very similar to Feyerabend's epistemological anarchy in its practical application. How else could one explain the power of intercessory prayer⁶ and the use of Echinacea¹ as topics of Cochrane reviews? We are well aware that evidence and human observation is fallible which is why we strive to minimise bias rather than follow the utopia of eliminating it. To stay with Thomas Kuhn, we do not care what paradigm is chosen, we care about what works.

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