

The Cochrane Library

An online health resource for all Australians

Most of us are familiar with the sort of health stories which feature on programs such as *A Current Affair* and in many lifestyle magazines. These often highlight the latest medical breakthrough or health scare. But how can consumers tell whether the research behind these stories is any good? Until recently consumers

have had only limited access to the sort of research information available to health professionals.

This changed several years ago when PubMed, the vast database of health research from the United States National Library of Medicine, was made freely available. An equally important milestone on the path to reliable health information for all was reached last month when the Federal Minister for Health launched nationwide access to the Cochrane Library in Australia.

For several years the Cochrane Library has been a popular resource among clinicians wanting to make their practice 'evidence-based'. The Library is a regular electronic publication that brings together research that looks at the effectiveness of different health care treatments and interventions. It is put together by clinicians, consumers and researchers from around the world and is the resource clinicians use when they want to know if one particular treatment or procedure is any better or worse than another.

Much of the information in the Cochrane Library is presented in the form of systematic reviews (also referred to as Cochrane reviews). The idea behind these reviews is simple. Imagine you have come across the results of a single clinical trial of a new cream to treat eczema. The results look promising — people in the group given the new cream seem to do better than the control group — but the trial is very small, just twelve people.

How do we know if the results from this small study would be repeated if we tested the cream in a different set of people?

The answer is we don't know for sure. To conclude whether one treatment is better or more effective than another, we either need to carry out very large trials (which can be expensive and time-consuming), or we need to find all the trials that have been done around the world looking at the same intervention (in this case, the new eczema cream) and try to work out the 'average' result from the trials. By combining lots of individual studies, reviews can thus provide us with conclusive evidence.

There are about 1500 Cochrane reviews in the Library, with 300 more added every year. Topics covered are as broad as health itself, so in addition to many medical conditions, you'll find information on injury prevention for pedestrians and cyclists, St John's wort for depression, programs to reduce juvenile delinquency, the prevention of jet lag, advice on low-fat diets for obesity, and prayer for the alleviation of ill health.

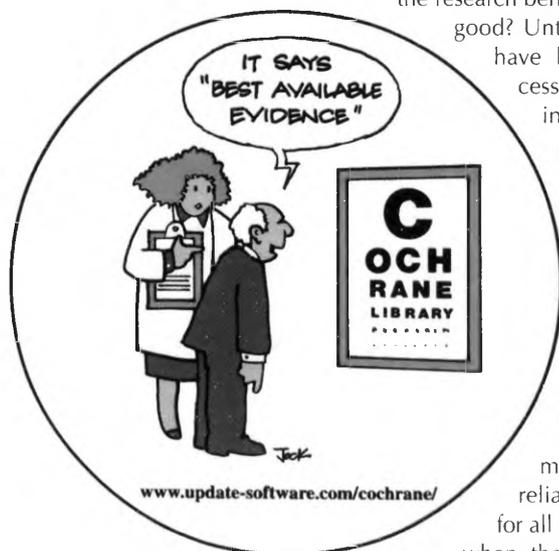
However, it's unlikely that you will find answers to all your questions yet. The Cochrane Library is still a relatively new publication — it was first published in 1996 — and probably another 10 000 reviews are needed before a substantial proportion of all health care questions are covered. It's also important to stress that the Library is there to support health care decisions and inform people receiving care; it is not intended to replace personal consultations with health care practitioners. An introductory web-based guide to the Cochrane Library designed with the uninitiated in mind is available from the National Institute of Clinical Studies (NICS) website (<http://www.nicsl.com.au>).

For more information and to access the Cochrane Library:

- 1 Go to <http://www.update-software.com/cochrane/>.
- 2 Select **Log on** from the left-hand menu.
- 3 Click the **Log on anonymously** button.
- 4 The opening screen of the Cochrane Library will appear.

The licence to provide access for all Australians to the Cochrane Library has been negotiated by the National Institute of Clinical Studies, on behalf of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. The NICS Guide to the Cochrane Library is available at <http://www.nicsl.com.au>.

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Example: How effective are antibiotics at managing sore throat?

A Cochrane review, which summarised the results of studies assessing the benefits of antibiotics in the management of sore throat, found that antibiotics offer only modest benefits. The review is based on more than 11 400 cases of sore throat from twenty-five individual clinical trials dating from 1950. Although some people suffer complications associated with sore throat, most people will recover fairly quickly without antibiotics (usually after three or four days). The reviewers found that antibiotics did shorten the duration of symptoms, but only by an average of about one day.