

Death of a whistleblower and Cochrane's moral collapse

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[Death of a whistleblower and Cochrane's moral collapse](#), by Peter C. Gøtzsche, £10.49 (Kindle edition) People's Press, 2019.

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This book chronicles how an upside-down world is created when marketing triumphs over science; where the actual target of a years-long campaign of harassment gets labelled the guilty party. Professor Gøtzsche recounts in graphic detail the series of events that led to him being expelled from Cochrane in September 2018, followed by his dismissal from Rigshospitalet (the Danish National Hospital) in January, 2019. Gøtzsche's compelling account includes quotes and documentation from written and oral sources, including transcripts of what was actually said in various meetings. The book stands as a detailed study in how organisations become corrupted unless they have carefully formulated processes that guard against anti-democratic forces taking control, once that organisation has been successful and reached a certain size. This is a book exposing how Cochrane fell into the clutches of a hierarchy more concerned with finances and marketing than the reasons it was created for. The death of its integrity, means that the most important institution left that could be trusted when it came to medical science, has disappeared down the same marketisation rabbit hole that captures so much of modern (so-called) medical science. Indeed it was because Professor Gøtzsche was prepared to call out the lowering of scientific standards in Cochrane that the hierarchy felt compelled to plot his demise.

Gøtzsche was one of the original co-founders of the Cochrane Collaboration (as it was then called) and has been a key player in developing it into a respected research network. He created many of the methodological tools used by Cochrane reviews and has never shied away from letting the data speak for itself, however unpopular the findings might be with some doctors, researchers, and in particular with pharmaceutical and other medical device manufacturers. Cochrane under the influence of Gøtzsche, and others like him, became known as a source of credible, reliable, and independent reviews, free from financial ties and commercial interests. The historical success of the Cochrane Collaboration meant that their work began to influence not only doctors' practice but health policy too. As the Collaboration grew and new centres were established around the world, their work became important for establishing an evidence based approach to medicine; helping doctors understand what worked and to what degree, but just as importantly what didn't work and what harms treatments may cause. It is these latter issues that meant that Gøtzsche was, and is, an inspiration to those of us who want medical practice to be as objective, free from bias, and safe as possible; but a threat to those who put commercial matters, marketisation, and image as their primary concern.

Gøtzsche's brilliance and his fearless approach earned him many enemies. He is one of Denmark's best-known researchers and is respected in research circles all over the world. But, for years he has documented how many products promoted by pharmaceutical industry and medical device manufacturers, can cause more harms than benefits; with detailed analysis of how the research from these companies misleads, obfuscates, or sometimes straightforwardly lies in order to protect and promote their products. He has shown how screening programmes (such as mammography), and certain vaccines can result in more harms for the public than benefits. His work on psychiatric drugs showing how poor they all are at delivering better lives for those who take them, at the same time as causing enormous harms to millions, has earned him the ire of the psychiatric establishment at large, including some Cochrane groups. The final nail in Gøtzsche's coffin, came after his group published a devastating critique of a Cochrane review of the HPV vaccine, which had supported it as safe and effective. Gøtzsche's group had access to far more data and came to a different and more critical conclusion about these vaccines. Thus, in this final straw for the Cochrane CEO and his henchmen, Gøtzsche had challenged both the powerful vaccine industry and other researchers in Cochrane. Instead of congratulating Gøtzsche for

ensuring the integrity of the science produced by Cochrane, they began a challenge to this truth seeker for being “off message”.

This book carefully recounts this dark period in medical science where a once trusted institution carried out one of the worst show trials ever conducted in academia. The CEO and his collaborators went about their task in a manner that mirrors how the drug industry operates. Its employees are obliged to protect the sales of drugs and therefore cannot criticise the company’s research publicly. There are many examples in the book of how once you label someone, their actions can be interpreted as fulfilling that label. For example, after being kept waiting for hours outside a room where a meeting about his potential expulsion is being discussed, an understandably frustrated Professor Gøtzsche, decides to knock on the door and go in to ask if it is OK if he goes back to the hotel rather than carry on waiting. He is reprimanded for entering the meeting and a brief altercation ensues, before Professor Gøtzsche leaves. This then becomes the only actual example of his alleged “bad behaviour” and part of the “evidence” for why he should be dismissed.

After his expulsion from Cochrane, through a majority vote of board members of only 6 against 5, with one abstention, a further four members of the board walked out in protest. Leading medical scientists from all over the world expressed their solidarity with Gøtzsche and outrage at what Cochrane had done. They universally praised Gøtzsche as a tireless advocate for research excellence, a fearless critic of scientific misconduct, and a powerful opponent of the corruption of research by industry interests, and criticised the unsupportable actions of Cochrane. History will recount this as the death of Cochrane rather than the whistleblower.

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