

# Just Three from the CSG

The newsletter of the Cochrane Skin Group  
Part of the Cochrane Collaboration

Visit us on the web at [www.nottingham.ac.uk/~muzd](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~muzd)



## Editorial

Greetings from the Cochrane Skin Group editorial base in Nottingham. This year has been a busy year for us in dealing with a huge increase in the number of review teams. This is good news in that we wish to promote lots of high quality systematic reviews within dermatology, but coping with the increased workload with the same amount of infrastructure funding can be a challenge. Right now, we are waiting to hear from the UK National Health Service what our contracts are likely to be for the next 3 years, so fingers crossed that we will be able to sustain and increase our support to reviewers.

One of this year's highlights was our annual Cochrane Skin Group meeting, which was held in Rome, thanks to the hard work of Luigi Naldi and his colleagues. Thank you Luigi and Mauro Picardo for being such excellent hosts at such a marvellous venue. The annual Skin Group meetings are such an important function to come to in order to understand what the Group is all about and how to learn from others, so please come next year if you have not been to one.

In this Autumn's newsletter, Maxine Whitton, one of our most productive consumer members, gives her reflections on the Rome meeting and how her review on vitiligo might have sparked off Mauro Picardo's team into another piece of related research into standardising the assessment of vitiligo.

It was also heartening to meet Alida de Pase, a consumer from Italy. Alida has also shared her reflections of the Rome meeting with us in this newsletter, and I remember her telling me how wonderful it was to see how people from all professional backgrounds mixed together at the meeting without any professional boundaries. That's what Cochrane is all about, after all.

And finally, I thought I would end with a short article providing reviewers with what I hope is helpful advice on responding to referees' comments. This article stems from a workshop that I did with dermatology registrars in Nottingham and Dublin, but it occurred to me that the main lessons were applicable to the Cochrane Skin Group work as well. The key is in following Hywel's three golden rules, which are...you'll have to read the article!

Hywel Williams  
Co-ordinating Editor of the Cochrane Skin Group

Issue 13

October 2003

### Inside this issue:

<b>ONE</b>	2
<i>Returning to Rome with the Skin Group</i>	
<b>TWO</b>	3
<i>Annual Meeting—A Consumer Perspective</i>	
<b>THREE</b>	4
<i>How to respond to referees' comments</i>	

Cochrane Skin Group  
Centre of Evidence-Based Dermatology  
South Block, Level C  
Queens Medical Centre  
University Hospital  
Nottingham NG7 2UH  
United Kingdom

Phone:  
+44 115 919 4415  
Fax:  
+44 115 970 9003  
Website:  
[www.nottingham.ac.uk/~muzd](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~muzd)

### Coming Soon in the Cochrane Library Issue 4, 2003 — New Skin Group protocols

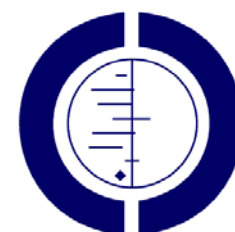
*Interventions for preventing occupational irritant hand dermatitis* — Bauer A, Bong J, Coenraads PJ, Elsner P, English J, Williams HC

*Interventions for alopecia areata* — Dobbins HM, Delamere FM, Sladden MJ, Sinclair, R

*Interventions for actinic keratoses* — Gupta, AK, Inniss K, Wainwright R, Chow, M, Cooper E

*Oral evening primrose oil and borage oil for atopic eczema* — Schmidt K, Pittler MH, Wilson N, van Gool C, Humphreys R, Ernst E

For access to the Cochrane Library see <http://www.update-software.com/cochrane/provisions.htm>



THE COCHRANE  
COLLABORATION®

## ONE Returning to Rome with the Skin Group

Rome, the choice of venue for this year's Skin Group meeting, brought back happy memories from my first visit nearly twenty years ago with my husband and a later visit with my daughter. So, I felt quite excited, but also a little nervous at the prospect of spending three days in this beautiful city. This time around I would not be on holiday but had volunteered to make a presentation about the review on interventions for vitiligo, for which I am the lead reviewer.

The review is nearing completion but we have encountered some problems, and my enthusiasm had gradually drained away. By the time the meeting began I really felt like throwing in the towel, or at least throwing the review out of the window. It was such a relief to speak with another lead reviewer who had at one point felt exactly the same way about hers. This experience highlights the value of these annual meetings. They provide an opportunity for discussion and exchange of views. The comments and suggestions I received, as well as the sympathetic encouragement from fellow reviewers, rekindled my determination to continue with the review. Not that I really have much choice - "I have started so will finish" as Magnus Magnusson used to say on Mastermind.

The venue was IFO, Istituti Fisioterapici Ospitalieri, at the Istituto Ospitaliero Dermosifilopatico di s. Maria e s. Gallicano, which is some distance from the centre of Rome, but an impressive building with endless corridors and the typical 'red line' along the floor intended to lead us to our destination. Although we followed it, we still got lost trying to find the meeting room and ended up in the basement among all the pipes and heating ducts.

The programme for the meeting itself was varied and interesting. I enjoyed all the presentations, but would pick out Damiano Abeni's talk on quality of life issues in dermatology, and the melanoma guidelines talk by Joanne Topalian from the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network (SIGN), as particularly interesting for me. Tina, Finola and Hywel spoke for the editorial team, giving an overview of achievements in the past year. Hywel set the scene for the meeting as a whole with his particular brand of enthusiasm and a brave and commendable attempt at speaking Italian in response to the warm welcoming address by Mauro Picardo, Director of the Institute. The team painted a picture of a committed and hardworking group but, with increasing workload, victims to some extent of their own success. The Group is in desperate need of more resources and funding to carry on the good work, and strategies are being put in place to address this problem.

One of the most satisfying outcomes of the meeting for me arose from one of the findings of the vitiligo review. The review showed that there is no standardised method of assessing re-pigmentation. In response to this finding, Dr Picardo is interested in setting up a team of researchers to develop a standardised method. This should improve the quality of studies on vitiligo in the future.

On the social side, we had a memorable meal on Friday night hosted by Luigi Naldi with typical Italian hospitality. The food was excellent and the company congenial. In spite of the intense heat, we managed to eat several courses and drink a fair amount of wine. Those of us who stayed on until Sunday went out on Saturday evening to an amazing fish restaurant where there was no menu but several delicious dishes, one after another (I ignored what it might be doing to my waistline). Tina and I stayed an extra day, but it was a pity it was too hot to do much sightseeing. We did manage to see the church of San Agostino with its wonderful Caravaggio and other treasures. In the end, however, we decided to go early to the relative cool of the air-conditioned airport and wait until departure time.

I was only able to attend the meeting because of a generous stipend from the Skin Group, which covered about half my costs, and for which I am most grateful. I look forward to the next meeting and trust that by then the Group will have found some funding, and the vitiligo review will be published.

Maxine Whitton, UK



Enjoying 'the amazing fish restaurant' - courtesy of Urbà González.

*"I have started so I will finish" as Magnus Magnusson used to say on Mastermind'.*

## TWO The Annual Meeting—A Consumer Perspective

As one of the non-dermatologists attending the Rome Cochrane Skin Group Meeting (my interest is the use of camouflage to improve my own quality of life and that of fellow vitiligo-sufferers), I was full of enthusiasm for the way it was organised by Luigi Naldi and his team. I discovered to my surprise that he lives and works in my town, Bergamo. The outcome of this was a meeting I have had with him a few days ago in our local hospital, where we talked widely on dermatological subjects and made plans which we hope will come to fruition.

I was pleased to hear Mauro Picardo, our host, present the history of San Gallicano hospital, much of which even I as an Italian didn't know, and bring us up to date on the important work being carried out there. I also enjoyed the presentation by the, in her own words 'retired', Maxine Whitton, a tireless worker for those, like her and me, affected by vitiligo. Since I first met her at a British Vitiligo Society meeting in London a few years ago, Maxine has become a good friend, a source of experience, advice and knowledge, but best of all, brought Cochrane to my attention.

Damiano Abeni was another speaker whose words I warmly welcomed, concerned as he is with the over-riding importance of quality of life to people with a dermatological disease which, until recently, has received little attention. I remember so clearly my own attempts years ago, with so little success, to get dermatologists to realise how these 'diseases' can produce 'illnesses', particularly psychological ones. In an attempt at self-help, I began to develop camouflage techniques and products. It was also heartening to see someone so young and determined in tackling a technical subject as Luciana Ballini, with her approach to the implementation of guidelines.

I noticed the large proportion of young professionals taking part in the meeting, and bringing their more informal touch to the proceedings both inside and outside the conference hall. I'll always remember Bob Dellavalle in his straw hat, and his group of co-workers from Denver, Colorado.

*'It provides hope for a better approach to vitiligo, and an opportunity to participate in the dermatological field, not as a number, but as a real person.'*

Also memorable was that hot evening in the typical Trastevere trattoria Ripa 12, where we were Luigi Naldi's guests, and where the San Gallicano derms feel at home so at home, as Trastevere was the location of the original dermatological hospital. On such a summer night, Trastevere was like a stage-set, full of happy, young people, lovers wandering the ancient streets. Sitting at table Tina Leonard had a mineral water spray in her bag which she used on face, chest and arms, a good idea to try in this particularly hot Italian summer. Opposite me sat Maxine, her usual witty self despite the heat. I

myself was deep into questions of dermal fillers, botox and similar techniques with Berthold Rzany from Berlin. This was an apt follow-up to two of the quotations Damiano Abeni used during his deeply-felt presentation earlier that afternoon:

"Every human being desires to live a long time, but nobody wants to get old" (Jonathan Swift), and

"Everyone should die young, but as late as possible" (Isaac Stern).

So I can't wait for the next meeting, to meet again with the heart and soul of the Skin Group from Nottingham, Tina Leonard, Finola Delamere, Erika Petersen and the witty Hywel Williams (who reminded me of a Shakespearean actor on the podium), and hear an up-date on their progress, along with all the others. Suddenly I find myself welcomed and encouraged to become involved in this group. It is an extraordinary opportunity for me to make others, with whom I am in contact, aware of the existence of Cochrane. It provides hope for a better approach to vitiligo, and an opportunity to participate in the dermatological field, not as a number, but as a real person.

Alida DePase



Alida de Pase

### WELCOME CHARLOTTE!

*The Cochrane Skin Group would like to welcome Charlotte Puls, who has recently joined us to help Finola organise the growing stacks of journals and articles being searched for trials.*

## THREE How to respond to referees' comments

All Cochrane Skin Group review teams will reach a stage where they are faced with a long list of referees' comments that relate to their submitted protocol or review. Hopefully, your lead editor will provide you with some guidance as to which are the most important points to tackle and how you might deal with conflicting views. But how do you go about structuring your response letter, and what can you do to maximise your chance of getting the protocol/review being accepted without a further round of queries? The answer? – Hywel's three golden rules. These three golden rules are a personal view of how to respond to referees comments based on my experience as a paper writer and paper referee.

### 1 Respond completely

Referees will become irritated if you only respond to some of their points and you completely ignore others. Incomplete responses waste time in that they invoke another round of submission, and it will encourage your referees to look even harder at your comments to see if you have answered the concerns satisfactorily. In order to avoid missing comments, I would recommend typing or pasting the original referees' comment into your letter of response, with the sub-heading of "response" underneath each one. This not only helps you to ensure that all of the comments have been dealt with, but it also forces you to re-read and listen to exactly what the referee has said rather than respond to what you think they said. Sometimes, it is not clear how many points the referee is making in a comment if it is one large paragraph as opposed to the numbered points that we encourage our referees to do. In such a situation, you should split the paragraph into however many discrete points as you see fit, thereby enabling you to respond to each one.

#### **Hywel's three golden rules of responding to referees are:**

- 1 Respond completely
- 2 Respond politely
- 3 Respond with evidence

### 2 Respond politely

Remember that referees are human beings, who usually perform the task on a Sunday morning during family time. Try not to get too pompous or irritated with them even if you strongly disagree with their comments. There is nothing wrong in disagreeing with comments, but there are ways of doing this courteously and in a way that makes the referee feel valued. The box to the right gives you some ideas of the sorts of phrases that I use when starting off a sentence that responds to referees' comments. As with all negotiation, the secret is to try and find some common ground.

#### **Some useful phrases to start off your responses to referees**

*"We agree with the referee that.... but...."*  
*"We too were disappointed with the small number of studies, yet...."*  
*"Whilst we acknowledge the referees' concerns regarding..."*  
*"We thank the referee for drawing our attention to this point, but...."*  
*"It is true that...., but..."*  
*"We are delighted that our review has stimulated such debate..."*  
*"We agree that our review might have been...."*  
*"The referee is right to point out...."*  
*"We thank the referee for drawing our attention to ...."*

### 3 Respond with evidence

There is only one thing more irritating than completely ignoring one of the referees' comments and that is to respond inadequately to them by abrupt unqualified phrases such as "we disagree". There is nothing wrong with disagreeing, but you will need to explain why you disagree and back up your argument with some facts and additional references if necessary.

### Conclusion

I realise that responding to a content expert, consumer, statistics reviewer, technical editor and one or more Cochrane Skin Group editors can add up to a lot of work, and it can look daunting if you are not used to publishing papers. Although it is questionable how much peer review can sort out the good from the bad, there is ample evidence that peer review can improve the quality of existing material. And quality is what the Skin Group aims to achieve. So next time you are faced with a pile of referees' comments, just remember Hywel's three golden rules.

Hywel Williams, Co-ordinating Editor

*If you would like to write an article for the next Skin Group Newsletter, we are pleased to accept articles on any topic related to Skin Group activities of up to 1000 words.*

*Please send your contributions and any questions to Erika Petersen at: [erika.petersen@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:erika.petersen@nottingham.ac.uk)*

*The deadline for submissions for the next issue is 26 November 2003.*