

This summary was published in *Cochrane News* in September 2002

COCHRANE SOFTWARE NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY

Mike Clarke, Julian Higgins and Valeria Marinho; for those involved in the design, conduct, analysis, interpretation, and reporting of the Survey.

The Cochrane Software Needs Assessment Survey took place in the second half of 2001 across the Cochrane Collaboration. In a very wide consultation, data were collected to guide the development of the Collaboration's Information Management System. At the moment, key components of this System are the software used to prepare and maintain Cochrane Reviews (RevMan), the software used to submit them for publication (ModMan) and a contacts database (HIREx).

Three versions of the survey were prepared to target the editorial bases of Collaborative Review Groups (CRGs), the co-ordinating bases of other Cochrane entities and individual participants in the Cochrane Collaboration. The survey addressed different aspects of the Information Management System including use of computers, e-mail and world wide web, contacts management, preparation of entity modules, preparation of reviews, submission/sharing/tracking of reviews, specialized registers, comments and criticisms, and the integration of the system as a whole. It was distributed in July 2001 to the contact person for each Cochrane entity and to all individuals within the Cochrane Collaboration whose contact details were available in the Parent database or had been sent to the Nordic Cochrane Centre for this purpose. The distribution was by email notification of the website address where the survey could be completed online or by regular mail of a paper copy if a full postal address was available (or if a paper copy was requested).

The response rate from CRGs (43/49) and other entities (29/36) was high but the response rate of 15% (496/3833) from individuals was lower than had been hoped. However, their attitudes to many aspects of the Information Management System were consistent with those of the entities, and having feedback from several hundred participants in the Cochrane Collaboration still provides a solid basis to plan future developments. Less than 10% of the responses were from people in low and middle income countries.

The main findings of the survey were summarised in a report to the Steering Group meeting in April 2002, containing recommendations from the Information Management System Group. The Steering Group agreed that these recommendations, reproduced below, should be implemented through the development of software and other systems, which should be as interlinked and compatible as possible:

1. The Cochrane Collaboration should develop an improved central system for the management of people's contact details.
2. The components of the Information Management System should be made more interlinked so that information in different components can be automatically shared among these parts.
3. The components of the Information Management System should allow users to work in existing, popular software as much as possible (e.g. for word processing, reference management and statistical analysis).

4. The Cochrane Collaboration should continue to develop and support the tools for compiling and submitting the modules (including reviews) of CRGs and the descriptions of activity of other Cochrane entities.
5. The Cochrane Collaboration should consider how best to support the need for systems to track reviews within CRGs.
6. The Cochrane Collaboration should develop, and encourage the development of, systems for handling contact information that are based on clearly defined standards for exchange of information; rather than supporting all the systems for managing contact information which are used locally within Cochrane entities.
7. The Cochrane Collaboration should begin to develop a Collaboration-wide register of studies.

Actions are now being taken to implement the first six of these recommendations by the Information Management System team at the Nordic Cochrane Centre, in consultation with the Information Management System Group and the Steering Group. The seventh recommendation will be taken account of in relation to further developments in CENTRAL.

A new survey is being prepared to capture additional information from participants in the Cochrane Collaboration who are based in low and middle income countries, in recognition of the importance of reliable data from these participants, and from people whose first language is not English.

Many thanks are due to the members of the Cochrane Collaboration who completed and returned the survey, as well as to the individuals who helped in its design, analyses and interpretation but are too numerous to mention in the space available here. Further information about the survey is available from the Information Management System website (<http://www.cochrane-net.org/imsg/>).