Reporting unpublished trials in CIDG reviews

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An important part of searching for trails for Cochrane reviews involves identifying studies which are still ongoing or, although completed have not yet been published in a journal.

The Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of interventions devotes a full section (6.2.3; Unpublished and ongoing studies) to this topic and states that finding out about unpublished studies and including them in a review when appropriate is important for minimizing bias. At CIDG we encourage review authors to contact researchers, organizations and pharmaceutical companies to obtain information about ongoing and unpublished trials.

Using Revman 5 it is now possible to list ongoing studies and their characteristics in a published review, this is different, however, from obtaining information about yet unpublished trials from the trialists themselves, as this often involves also receiving the results of the study.

This can help as it allows authors to get on with updating their review. However, it is very important that you do not publish the review containing the data prior to the publication of the trial, without explicit, written permission from the primary author of the unpublished study which should be forwarded with the review to the editorial base so the editor can check this.

Pre-publication in a Cochrane review may negatively affect the chances of the study report to be published in another journal. This would constitute a breach of trust between the reviews authors/Cochrane group and the trialists. Although obtaining this permission seems a fairly obvious good practice, there have been cases where trials' data was disclosed without it, perhaps because of a misunderstanding or lack of communications between Cochrane authors and researchers.

There is no mention of this scenario in the Cochrane handbook for Systematic Reviews where the emphasis is on the relevance of finding and incorporating unpublished and ongoing studies in Cochrane reviews. At CIDG we suggest that explicit permission for including results from unpublished trials in reviews should be clearly obtained and that this action should be included in the review's checklist.