

Collaborating with Cochrane

by Dana Scully

For many seemingly large tasks, we often get stymied at the starting block. For me, the trouble usually begins with a fairly benign question: where do I start? I have found that a simple place to begin any research-oriented task is in The Cochrane Library at <http://www.thecochranelibrary.com> (Figure 1)

The Cochrane Library is part of The Cochrane Collaboration, an internationally-recognised organisation that compiles health information into systematic reviews for practitioners and laymen alike.

Systematic reviews, sometimes and somewhat inaccurately known as meta-analyses, are compilations of best evidence with respect to specific search topics; as such, they incorporate a plethora of information into a single comprehensive review. These reviews are time-savers. In addition, they are available either as full-length papers or - for the time-constricted researchers amongst us - as summaries.

There are various ways to search for information in The Cochrane Library, but by far the easiest is to use the basic search bar in the upper left hand corner of the home screen. Just type your search term into the empty white box and hit the 'go' button.

Let's start with a general search term like 'massage'.

A small drop-down box will appear (not shown in illustration) as you type, offering common search terms. If your search term appears, click into it. If it doesn't, keep typing. Your particular search term may still appear in the drop-down box; it just might not be a commonly queried term.

The results page supplies the title, author/s, and date of reviews available, as well as refining tools to modify your search. (Figure 2)

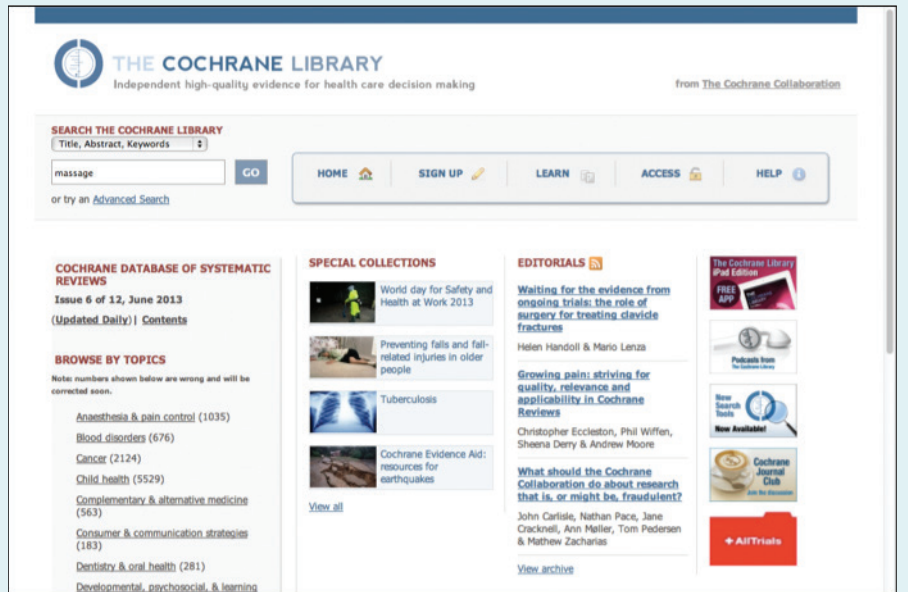


Figure 1: A Cochrane Library home page

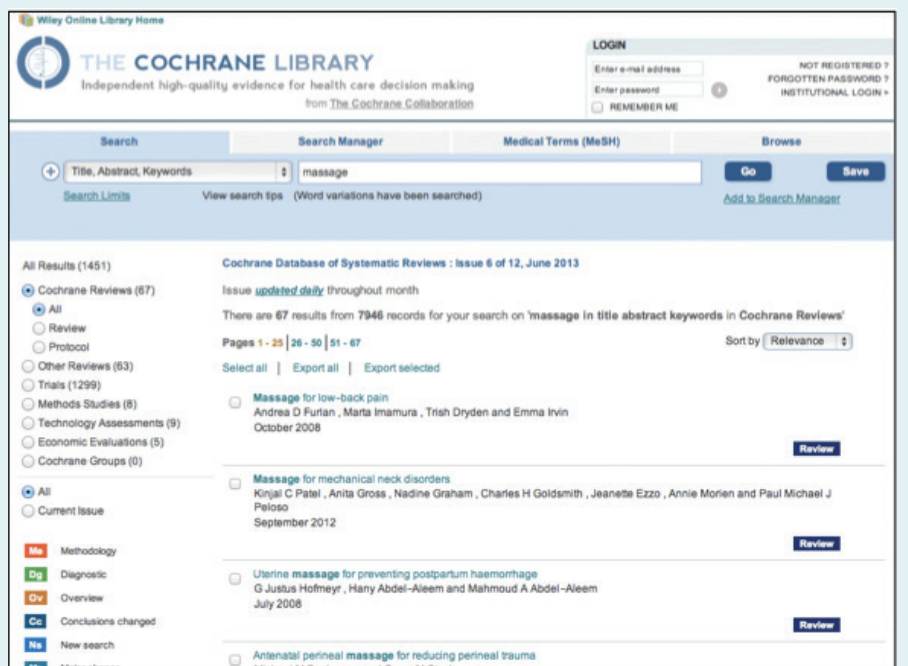


Figure 2: A Cochrane Library results page

If a review is available in relation to your search term, it will be noted on the right hand side of the entry in a dark blue box with the word 'review' inside. (If this box is absent, the entry will link you to an abstract but will not allow you access to the review unless you become a member of The Cochrane Collaboration - for a fee. If this entry is one about which you want more information, don't despair. Take note of the publication details contained in the references and try to find them in PubMed or through your local library.)

'Massage' is a large category. It has returned 67 likely results, but close to 8000 that match the search term in a title, an abstract, or a keyword. Sixty-seven entries are a lot to review, so click into the circled plus sign in the blue bar at the top of your results screen. Another line appears, allowing you to refine your search and receive entries more specific to your search term/s.

The Search tab allows you to:

- change the category of data that will be searched by clicking into the up and down black arrows on the right of the 'Title, Abstract, Keywords' bar
- change where your terms will be searched by clicking into the up and down black arrows on the right of the 'Search All Text' bar
- add another search term bar or delete an existing bar by clicking into the minus or plus symbols on the far left of your search term bar
- add or change Boolean terms (AND, OR, NOT) to limit the data being searched (Figure 3)

Because 'massage' returned so many entries, let's refine it to include one of the most common client presentations: low back pain. Type 'low back pain' into the long white bar underneath 'massage'. (Figure 4)

Forty results were returned, each featuring 'massage' and 'low back pain' in the title or in the abstract or in the keywords.

If you are time-poor, forty results is still quite a lot. Clicking into 'Search Limits' (underneath the Boolean phrases bar) will allow you to further refine or limit the products (see explanation below), status, date and/or word variations that will be searched. (Figure 5)

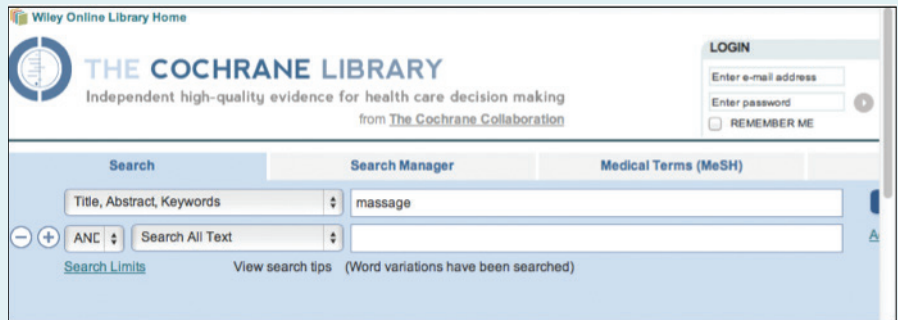


Figure 3: A Cochrane Library search tab

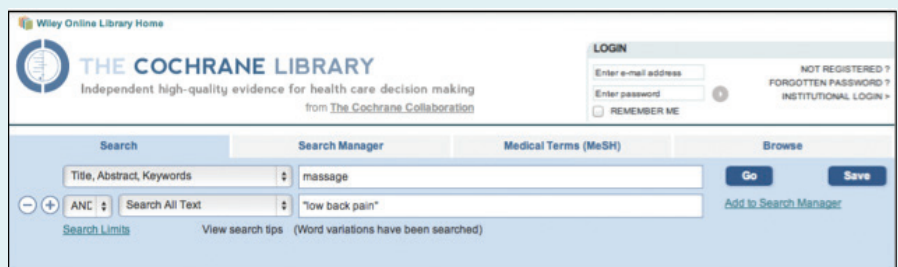


Figure 4

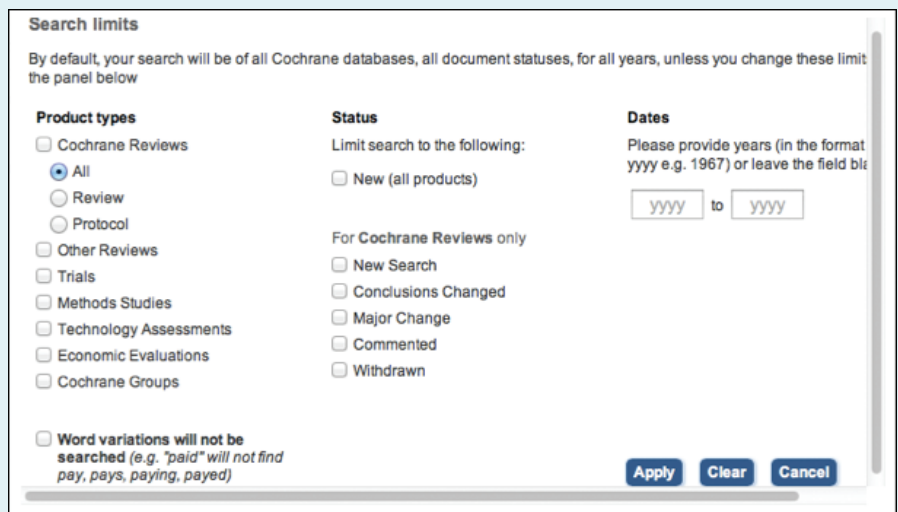


Figure 5: A Cochrane Search Limits box

When starting out, the main search limits to be aware of are the following product types:

Cochrane Reviews and Protocols:

Reviews are the most common search query in the Cochrane Library. ‘Cochrane Reviews’ are the systematic reviews mentioned previously that provide a compilation of information in one resource, thereby allowing busy therapists quick and painless access to up-to-date and reliable information. By contrast, ‘protocols’ constitute an action plan of sorts; an outline detailing how systematic reviews will be or have been compiled. They provide insights into how a specific review was conducted and enable therapists to delve deeper into the workings of a specific review - and whether or not it is appropriate for his or her purposes.

Other Reviews: ‘Other Reviews’ are ‘other’ systematic reviews, those not compiled by the Cochrane Review Board, but maintained in their database.

Trials: ‘Trials’ are essentially experiments that test specific interventions. Not all trials are registered, but the Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials (aka: CENTRAL) has established one of the most comprehensive and accessible registers available. Studying individual trials is often more time-consuming than studying systematic reviews, but they can yield valuable results, making the time spent well worth it in the end.

Economic Evaluations: ‘Economic Evaluations’ are just that: estimates of how much an intervention may cost, usually compared to another intervention. Such evaluations currently have limited utility for massage purposes but, in the ever-expanding world of research, arguably their relevance will become more significant in the near future.

In addition to the limitation inherent in the product types, a few other limiters are available: ‘**Word Variation**’, ‘**Status**’, and ‘**Dates**’. These are self-explanatory, but the most important is ‘**Dates**’. Currency is important in any search for information. It is recommended that most searches be contained within the last ten years.

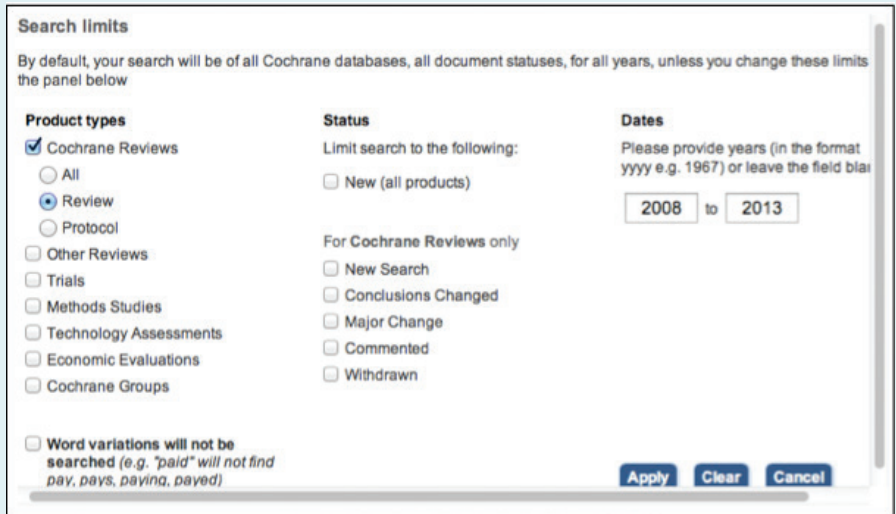


Figure 6

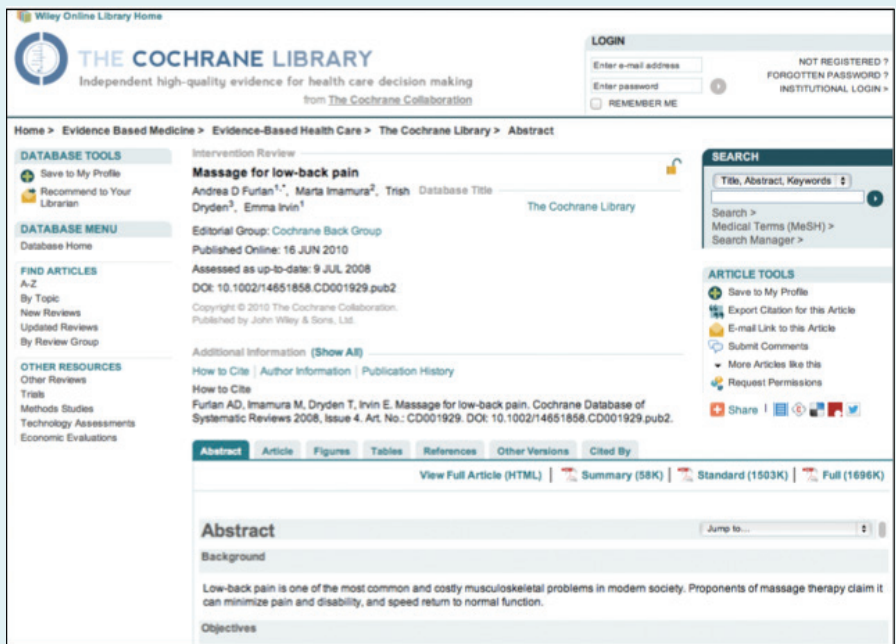


Figure 7: A Cochrane Review abstract

To limit our search, click into the box next to 'Cochrane Reviews' and also click the radio dot next to 'Review'. We want to find something relatively current, so let's look at the past five years: type in 2008-2013 to refine the date. Click 'Apply' in the lower right hand corner. This will close the box, but the results won't change until you click the dark blue 'Go' button in the upper right hand corner of the blue search tab. (Figure 6)

Now thirty-four results have been returned. Further refining may be in order; but at this point, you get the gist of it.

Now, let's get into the meat of our search. Click your cursor into the **aqua coloured title** of the first entry. This is a hyperlink to the abstract. (Figure 7)

Abstracts in themselves contain a good deal of information: the name of the review, the authors, and dates, and even 'how to cite' are provided for you. But by far the most important fields are the plain language summaries and links to the article.

Scroll down to find the **'Plain Language Summary'**. And it truly is in plain language—no research jargon, p-ratios, or charts here. It contains a quick overview of the systematic review.

For a more detailed review, scroll back up the page. You'll see the following:

Click into either View Full Article (HTML) or PDF Full (#####K). (Figure 8)

This is what we've all been waiting for—the full systematic review which provides a compilation of the best evidence available on your topic, in this case 'massage AND low back pain'. You'll find the abstract and the plain language summary here, too, in addition to the objective of the paper, the methods employed in researching the topic, the results of the review, a discussion of the results, the author's conclusions, references, data analysis, and more. As promised, systematic reviews are veritable goldmines of information on health topics and easy starting points for any search. (Figure 9)

Play around with the tools. Don't be afraid to have a go. If all else fails, close your web browser, wait a minute, and start all over again. No harm, no foul.



Figure 8

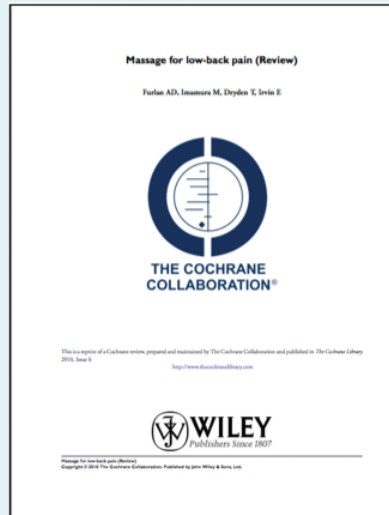
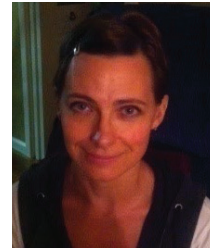


Figure 9: A Cochrane Review title page from the HTML or PDF hyperlink



Dana Scully has been a member of the AMT since 2001. She recently completed her Bachelor of Health Science in Complementary Medicine through Charles Sturt University. Dana is passionate about health care and member education.

Astute researchers will notice other tabs and tools. This article covers only the basics, but once you've mastered those, try the others. The Cochrane Library has put together an extensive review of these at <http://www.thecochranelibrary.com/view/0/SearchManual.html>, but again, the best way to learn is to just get stuck in.

No longer are we trapped by indecision about where to start a search. The Cochrane Library's basic search bar provides an easy and accessible beginning for even the most time-constricted therapist. With just a few clicks on our computer, we have access to comprehensive and reliable reviews about a number of health topics, making searches fast, easy, and effective. Collaborating with The Cochrane Library makes 'where to start a search' a no brainer. ■ amt