

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL ONLY

13 December 2013

Mitchell Benzine
Majority Counsel
Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic
U.S. House of Representatives
2335 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515
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Re: Misleading statements made by lawyers acting on behalf of Dr. Francis S. Collins on our Cochrane review.

Dear Sir, I am writing to you as the first and longest-serving author of the Cochrane review "[Physical interventions to interrupt or reduce the spread of respiratory viruses](#)."

The review, first published in 2007 and updated four times, has been the subject of a number of misquotes and misleading statements. The review is also the subject of misleading statements in the letter dated 3 December 2024 by Catherine A. Brandon and John Nassikas, acting on behalf of Dr Collins.

On page 2 of the letter, Ms Brandon and Mr Nassikas state, "The Final Report also fly-specks studies to support its broad conclusion that face masks do not work at all to mitigate COVID-19 transmission. See, e.g., Final Report, p. 204. To support this conclusion, the Select Subcommittee's Final Report relies heavily on a review by the Cochrane Collection, published in January 2023. Despite the authors cautioning that "[t]he high risk of bias in the trials, variation in outcome measurement, and relatively low adherence with the interventions during the studies *hampers drawing firm conclusions*," that is precisely what the Final Report does. The Editor-in-Chief of the Cochrane Library, Dr Karla Soares-Weiser, has provided clarifications about that study that corrects misinterpretations in the Final Report. Specifically, Dr Soares-Weiser noted that while "[m]any commentators have claimed that a recently-updated Cochrane Review shows that 'masks don't work'," such a statement is "*an inaccurate and misleading interpretation*." Dr. Soares-Weiser went so far as to apologise for the report's wording, which was "open to misinterpretation." The Final Report compounds this misinterpretation by ignoring the weight of evidence regarding masking. A systematic review of mask-related studies reveals that 1) more studies determined that masks and mask mandates reduced infection, and 2) wearing masks generally reduced COVID-19 transmission.

The statement is misleading as it ignores the fact that Dr Soares Weiser and the Cochrane Editors issued a second [statement](#) dated 6 June 2024, which ends with the sentence, "Following engagement with the authors, the decision has been made that changes to the plain language summary and abstract would not impact the scientific integrity of the content and so Cochrane is no longer seeking updates to the plain language summary and abstract of this version of the review."

No change has ever been made to the text of the 2023 version of the review, nor has it ever needed to be edited, as the Cochrane editor overseeing the review, Professor Michael Brown of Michigan State University told me in an email: "I apologize for how this transpired since when I had spoke to the NYTs reporter a couple of weeks ago, I stood by the conclusions of the review."

Dr Soares Weiser issued the statement cited in the letter [under pressure](#) from the New York Times influencer and [lobbyist](#) Zeynep Tufekci, who has no background in the study of respiratory viruses epidemiology. The New York Times ignored my letters of complaint and refused my right of reply about Dr Tufekci's lobbying and personal attacks.

The effects of lobbying and misinformation surrounding the review's findings also led Dr Rochelle Walenski to [mislead](#) Congress (House Committee on Appropriations) by claiming that the review had been "withdrawn." Once we presented the facts to the Clerk, the hearing record was corrected.

Therefore, I consider the statement on the public record by lawyers acting on behalf of Dr Francis S. Collins regarding our Cochrane review is misleading and requires correction.

I hope this letter is helpful to you in clarifying the facts about our review for your Select Subcommittee.



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References:

Jefferson T, Dooley L, Ferroni E, Al-Ansary LA, van Driel ML, Bawazeer GA, Jones MA, Hoffmann TC, Clark J, Beller EM, Glasziou PP, Conly JM. Physical interventions to interrupt or reduce the spread of respiratory viruses. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2023, Issue 1. Art. No.: CD006207. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD006207.pub6. Accessed 12 December 2024.