

Open access approach to medical research publishing will continue to grow, experts predict

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An online, open access approach to publishing scientific and medical research is proving successful and will continue to develop, MPs have been told.

Experts in publishing who were giving evidence to the parliamentary science and technology select committee on 23 May said that the approach used by *Public Library of Science (PLOS) One*—an online, open access journal for the communication of peer reviewed scientific and medical research—was being increasingly adopted by other organisations.

PLOS One and others such as the *BMJ*, which had followed its example, were speeding up research and enabling more research to be published, MPs were told as part of their inquiry into peer review.

The committee asked how much faster the *PLOS* website was at publishing articles than traditional journals.

Mark Patterson, director of publishing for *PLOS*, said, “We are trying to balance speed, which is clearly important to authors, against a process that is sufficiently robust both editorially and in the production process to give rise to a high quality product.

“We are on the fast side, but I don’t think we are super fast. The real benefit in *PLOS One* is the fact that authors won’t be asked to revise their manuscript and to raise it up a level or two, which is what happens at a lot of journals. There is more we could do to streamline the process and make it more efficient.”

The model was working well and being emulated, he added. *PLOS One*, which launched in December 2006, published 4000 articles in 2009 and 6700 in 2010.

“It has grown steadily and is gaining ground. In the last 12 months eight or more big publishers have announced, essentially, *PLOS One* lookalikes. The BMJ Group last year launched a clinical research version of *PLOS One* [*BMJ Open* (<http://bmjopen.bmj.com>)], and *Nature* has launched a natural science

version of *PLOS One*. The model is getting that level of endorsement from the major publishers.

“This approach is beginning to have an effect on the peer review process in terms of timing, quality, and ease of being able to recruit or have access to reviewers.”

MPs said there were estimates that UK higher education institutions were spending £110m (€126m; \$178m) to £165m worth of staff time a year on peer review and asked whether this was an acceptable cost to “subsidise publishers.”

Malcolm Read, executive secretary of the Joint Information Systems Committee, which helps UK colleges and universities to use IT to support learning, teaching, education, and research, told the MPs: “Reviewers get a great deal of benefit from doing it.

“They get early sight of research articles and, particularly if they are an editor, will get quite a bit of added standing in their disciplines.

“Where we have a worry is if scientists have to spend more time on peer review proportionally to their science. I don’t think researchers would feel that this is a particularly burdensome call on their time, as long as it does not get out of hand.”

Teresa Rees, professor of social science and former pro vice chancellor (research) at Cardiff University, said, “Conducting peer review helps in one’s own skill development.”

However, she added: “We do have an expanding number of journals, and there is increasing pressure to publish. I think there is a question of whether academics can keep up with reading all the material, so one might want to have a debate at some stage about [whether that is] the most effective and efficient way of managing the potential research that can be published.”

The inquiry continues.

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