Embracing Open Access

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Many in the science–technology–medicine (STM) world think open access (OA) is a recent phenomenon, something that evolved over the last several years. The reality is that OA was launched many years ago, and BMJ Group was one of the pioneers of the movement.

Our first foray into OA occurred when our flagship, British Medical Journal (BMJ), published content as OA in the 1990s; by 1998, all BMJ research content was freely available. It is important to note that OA to the BMJ Group did not mean merely that content was free. OA, to us, has always meant supporting the author community by supporting authors’ rights in retaining copyright. BMJ had a license that allowed the reuse of articles, and eventually the journal moved to a Creative Commons License for research. The journal’s policy also supports authors in depositing their articles in PubMed Central with an immediate deposit on publication as opposed to a deposit several months later.

Providing the author a choice in our specialty journals was the next obvious step for us in the OA movement. We knew that publishing in an established journal was important, but so was the option to disseminate research as widely as possible. We believed that we met those needs by creating an OA option within our well-known specialty publications. The new publishing model (often referred to as a hybrid model) was developed after the National Institutes of Health policy and similar policies issued by the Wellcome Trust and Research Councils UK were signed into law in December 2007. That choice was originally branded as unlocked but renamed simply as open access and is compliant with the policies of the main funding bodies and also serves the public interest when funding is paid by tax dollars. Hybrid OA is available for a fee to any author publishing original research in our specialty journals and allows authors to make their articles free online. With the OA option, we also deposit the final (copyedited and typeset) version into PubMed Central immediately on publication. Authors may also place the full, final article in the repositories of their choice. The article is recognized as OA in the journal table of contents and in the article itself.

Our next step in the world of OA was to launch the first OA general medicine journal (BMJ Open). Peer review for the journal began in 2010, and papers were published online in 2011. Our aim was to create a journal that published all types of research, including clinical science, clinical practice, health policy, health-care delivery, medical education, and research methodology. Editorial policy specified that publication decisions were based on the scientific and ethical soundness and transparency of the research. We also established an editorial policy to publish studies that reinforced practice, policy, or research—to create an open-door policy for research, if you will. The open-door policy allows research to have a home at BMJ Open if it asks good questions, even if the answers are not definitive. We believe that publishing such studies in an OA environment is essential and important both for ethical reasons and for completing the research record. That belief has also led us to facilitate sharing of data sets and increasing the availability of research data.

OA is changing. We recognize that OA is important to the research community, as is choice. Already, publishers have seen an increase in submissions, and new OA publishing models will no doubt be created to meet new needs. We are proud to be a pioneer, sponsor, and publisher of OA content in various publishing models.