

Open Access – what’s in it for me?

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Today is Open Access Day¹, intended to broaden awareness and understanding of Open Access. Many science bloggers have written about Open Access today, and links to a lot of these blog posts have been collected by Bora Zivkovic² or are found in the FriendFeed room set up for the day³. The purchase of Biomed Central – the largest Open Access publisher – by Springer announced last week⁴, and the announcement of the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA) today⁵ are strong signs that Open Access has grown up and is no longer new and experimental. This is probably a good time to give a personal report on the role of Open Access in my own work, and obviously that perspective is very different from the perspective of a journal publisher or a patient advocate⁶. I wish that more of the discussion would be about practical benefits or disadvantages for the people involved, rather than using the sometimes “religious” arguments for or against Open Access.

Do I have access to the papers I want to read?

I am in the privileged situation to work for a university hospital with institutional subscriptions to most journals I need. From the 10 journals I read the most (measured by the number of PDFs stored in the program Papers7), one journal is open access (The Oncologist), three additional journals allow free access after 6-12 months (PNAS, Cancer Research and Blood) and one journal is only available through my private subscription (Nature Clinical Practice Oncology). I would guess that I have access to about 95% of the full-text papers I want to read.

Can other people read my publications?

I’ve blogged about this before⁸, and little has changed in the 6 months since that post. Looking at my last 5 papers, only one of them is freely available (because the journal allows free access after 12 months), and for one of them even my own institution doesn’t have access. Good publications are still critical to advance my career, so publishing in “good” journals is more important to me than publishing in journals where as many people as possible can read my papers – and most people interested in my work probably also work in institutions with fulltext access. The citation advantage of Open Access papers would be an incentive to publish in Open Access journals, but to me that question still remains

unanswered⁹. I currently have limited research funding, so an Author-pays fee is a hurdle for me. I was coauthor of one paper this year that really should have been Open Access. It is a detailed guideline on how to treat patients with testicular cancer and should have been made freely available.

Where do I need more Open Access?

Most research never gets published and there are many good reasons why that is so. But the situation is different for clinical research involving the treatment of patients. A clinical trial not only costs a lot of money, but is also potentially harmful to a patient. For these reasons clinical trials need approval by institutional review boards and other institutions before they are even started, acting as a sort of peer review at the beginning. And the desired endpoint for a clinical trial is not necessarily a publication, but rather the approval of a new drug. A recent PLoS Medicine paper found that only 43% of the clinical trials used for approval of drugs by the American Food and Drug Administration (FDA) were later published¹⁰. And many other clinical trials with negative results not even appear in the documents submitted for drug approval, meaning that these data are lost forever. This so-called publication bias creates many problems, and is unfortunately encouraged by most journals. Fortunately this situation has recently changed. Clinical trials must be registered in public databases since 2005, and since last month the main results also have to be published in the public database once the trial has been completed¹¹.

fn1. Open Access Day

fn2. Open Access Day – the blog posts

fn3. Open Access Day FriendFeed Room

fn4. Open access publisher BioMed Central sold to Springer

fn5. Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association

fn6. Why I am an OA Advocate

fn7. Interview with Alexander Griekspoor

fn8. Public Access Week: Who could read my papers?

fn9. Article downloads and citations of open access papers

fn10. PLoS Medicine 2008 doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.0050191

fn11. FDAAA: Push to open data in clinical medicine