

Conflict of Interest in Open-Access Publishing

TO THE EDITOR: The Perspective articles by Wolpert, Frank, Carroll, and Haug (Feb. 28 issue)¹⁻⁴ address both the problems that are raised by open-access journals and the potential value of this alternative publishing model. Open-access journals are those that participate in any publication arrangement in which content is available to readers online, in digital form, generally without charge or copyright restriction. Readers can search databases without paying a fee and can lawfully read, print, further distribute, and cite the full text of copyrighted literature, licensed literature, or both. In the most common arrangement, authors pay to publish and retain the copyright to their work.

Open access generates numerous legal issues concerning ownership of intellectual property, licensing, embargo periods, consent, copyright expiration of older literature, “fair use” policies, indexing and archiving, and preservation of works. None of these issues, however, are as challenging as delivering rigorous scrutiny of potential conflicts of interest, which is an important hallmark of high-quality competitors that use traditional publishing models. The open-access model, in and of itself, need not diminish scientific rigor, selectivity, or peer review: journals can use the same standards and procedures for the acceptance of scholarly submissions whether the delivery medium involves restricted access (either in print or online) or open access in digital form. But when the journal is not constrained by size and each additional article generates more processing revenue (whether it be from authors, grants, or institutions), the incentive may be to publish more, not less. The overall lower rejection rate described in these Perspective articles raises concern about the potential for publication of lower-quality studies.

With a model that thrives on soliciting greater numbers of submissions, the scrutiny of conflict of interest may be diluted; this may invite the pharmaceutical industry to take advantage

of relaxed journal standards to ghostwrite articles and obscure its participation in the drug trials, analysis of the data, or both. Qualified peer reviewers are already at a premium, and more volume risks compromise in review. Scholarly journals would, we hope, resist the temptation to lower publication standards and accept weaker submissions or those with conflict-of-interest issues. Nevertheless, the inherent conflict of interest in the “author pays” model cannot be ignored. Professional editors and experienced staff are required to ferret out conflicts of interest; this expensive labor and sophisticated protocols do not always factor into the open-access model.

Open access may be an inevitable, attractive delivery model that is poised to provide high-quality, highly selected, peer-reviewed scientific literature to a wide audience at a lower marginal cost than that associated with the traditional model. However, until the scientific community — and the open-access readership — is presented with convincing data that they can rely on, traditional journals that include scrutiny of potential conflicts of interest are likely to remain the standard.

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