

Editorial

Open access publications

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There are quite a few models of dissemination of knowledge that are prevalent in the medical journal publishing industry. The publishers have opted for their selected specific types of these initiatives for valid reasons and motives of their own. Out of all these models, open access (OA) publication is now considered to be quite an important one for a variety of reasons.

OA publishing denotes easily and universally available, digital, online information. OA came into vogue in the 1990s with increasing access to and popularity of the internet. In such a situation, online dissemination of knowledge and research became an important avenue of virtually the norm¹. OA scholarly literature is free for the readership and frequently carries less restraining copyright and licensing barriers than traditionally published journals. While OA is a relatively more recent form of scholarly publishing, many OA journals are also known to employ well-established peer-review processes and to maintain high publishing standards².

In traditional old-style publications, persons or institutions have to pay subscription charges for access or are levied individual article access charges and therefore only those who have purchased a subscription to the journal or have paid a charge for accessing a given article will have access to a published article. Sometimes, the amounts needed to be paid are quite high, especially in the reputed and high-impact journals which have instituted such subscriptions or access charges. In such a scenario, the visibility of a given research communication in a subscription-based or article-access payment journal is likely to be low as only those who are interested and captivated by the article would be inclined to pay to access the paper³.

In the OA model, readers are not charged and they have free online access to the content³. Yet for all that, in some OA journals, the authors may be requested to pay an article processing charge when the manuscript is submitted for consideration or when it is accepted for publication. That will be a once-and-for-all payment. However, by allowing free access to the readership, the scientific community and the public, the OA model definitely ensures wider dissemination of the content³.

Another difference is that in the subscription model, copyrights for the published content are usually transferred to the journal, while with OA journals, the authors generally retain the copyright. This means that for an article published in a subscription-based journal, anybody who wishes to use any part of the paper will have to seek permission from the journal to be empowered to do so. On the other hand, OA journals often use Creative Commons licenses (CC licenses), making it easier for users to share, use, and build upon the original work. However, even in OA journals, the authors need to read through the author agreement very carefully before signing, to make sure that they are not giving away any of their rights to the publishers.

The Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities of 22nd October 2003 clearly states that it takes cognizance of the fact that the internet has essentially changed the practical and economic perspectives of distributing scientific knowledge⁴. The opportunity offered by the internet for portrayal of a chance to institute a global and interactive representation of human knowledge and the guarantee of worldwide access was plainly recognised. In the spirit of the Declaration of the Budapest OA Initiative, the ECHO Charter and the Bethesda Statement on OA Publishing, the Berlin Declaration was drafted to encourage the Internet as a functional instrument for a global scientific knowledge base and human reflection and to specify measures which research policymakers, research institutions, funding agencies, libraries, archives and museums need to consider. The mission was to explore new possibilities of knowledge dissemination increasingly through the OA paradigm via the Internet. In expanding the scope of the archetype, the Berlin Declaration stated that establishing OA as a worthwhile procedure ideally requires the active commitment of each producer of scientific knowledge and their contributions should include original scientific research results, raw data and metadata, source materials, digital representations of pictorial and graphical materials and scholarly multimedia material. The document also recognised that moving to OA changes the dissemination of knowledge in its relationship to legal and financial aspects. The organizations responsible for the declaration acknowledged that they aimed to find solutions that support further development of the

existing legal and financial frameworks to facilitate optimal use and access.

The OA policies of journals are a real boon to researchers and the readership, particularly in developing countries. It is a pity that some of the very best medical journals in the world have not taken steps to make their contributions to the global scientific scenario accessible to all and more so to colleagues in the developing world by switching over to OA. As has been pointed out even in the Berlin Declaration, it is accepted that the logistics of publishing high-quality journals would need money⁴. In such a context one could understand the need for subscriptions and payment for access to single articles to a certain extent. However, it would be that much more responsible if those very same journals could make some concessions to readers and the authors of developing countries. The initiative that has been taken by the reputed New England Journal of Medicine to make certain articles, especially those related to Covid-19, open access is perhaps an excellent start in this regard. There may be other high-end journals which allow OA to selected components in their journals.


Funding agencies too could help the cause by insisting on the authors they support publishing their work in OA journals. It is noteworthy that UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) in an OA Policy Update in December 2022, has deemed it fit to declare that from 1st January 2024, monographs, book chapters and edited collections that acknowledge UKRI funding will also need to be published in OA journals⁵.

From a local perspective, the Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health has remained an OA Publication, on a Creative Commons CC-BY license, right from the time it ventured into the ethereal realm of the internet in the year 2008. It has maintained the highest possible standards in peer reviewing and tried hard to match the values and ethics expected from an acclaimed medical publication. The journal has used the facilities provided by this initiative to embark on a committed venture to showcase research findings and scholarly information from our beautiful island of Sri Lanka, as well as erudite work from the Asian region.

May this OA venture of the Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health go from strength to strength.

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