Open access and data

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Much of the research is funded by the public, through trusts, direct support or governments. The results of research are generally publications, often articles. It is therefore no surprise that there is a call for openness, free access to publications and data. In fact, several funding organisations already require this, employees of the US government as well, and employees of Dutch universities can have their articles published in open access on most journals, including the Journal of Hematopathology. These are very good developments, but as a scientific community, we need to think about the effects.

Scientific journals are generally commercial products filled with free content, and editors and reviewers have no or very limited financial compensation. Although it is not always easy to find experts for reviewing manuscripts, most of the time, colleagues are happy to take on this interesting but demanding task. They realise that their own papers need expert reviewers too; they like to see high quality articles and also see new data before they are published. Over the years, there have been many complaints about the fairness of peer review, the best method to organise it and the sometimes misuse of it. Nevertheless, there is a general feeling that this process really improves quality of articles and gives credibility to the scientific process. Alternatives, like publishing your work on your own website and ask for comments, have very limited success. In fact, journals are still brands and high impact journals are still overloaded with manuscripts.

In this era of open access, we need to keep the quality of the peer review process high, maybe even higher. Since it is difficult for most researchers to pay high sums for publishing, the only way to go is to liaise with publishers and make contracts on paying for the use of articles and journals through consortia of libraries, like was done in the Netherlands. This is in fact a relatively minor change of the business model but has also the least risk on destroying the system before a new one has been developed and tested. Nevertheless, we need to see whether this approach is durable.

Open data is an even more complex problem. To have access to primary data after publishing is very good, because verification and control is possible. Furthermore, these primary data can also be used to answer different questions or make new comparisons. However, for the individual researcher, who often has put enormous effort into the generation of the primary data, it may feel unfair that such data are free to use for anyone, especially when there is not enough time to evaluate all aspects themselves. The alternative, paying for the data, seems logic but is probably not very feasible. The underlying issue is recognition and honour, even career opportunities. Although most researchers really go for discovery to satisfy their curiosity, science is business too. Most discoveries are only celebrated when the article is accepted for publication, which is basically a bit strange. After a long career in science, it is easy for me to write that the discovery is more rewarding than the publication, but for younger colleagues, that is a difficult stance; the career and grants depend on recognition based on output.

We can be proud on the scientific progress we make, with all the problems and faults that occur too. Nevertheless, we need also to think about the quality, distribution and openness to keep progress optimal. At least, my view on relevant developments in the field of hematopathology is free to read for all, for what it is worth....

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