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**A Response from the Public Library of Science [PLoS] to the July 20, 2004, report from the Science and Technology Committee of the United Kingdom House of Commons, “Scientific Publications: Free For All?”**

July 22, 2004 -- The report released by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee represents an important step forward in the global movement for open access to scientific and medical literature. The Committee outlines a plan to store the entire “published output” from UK institutions of higher education such that “it can be read, free of charge, online” -- a watershed recommendation for its recognition that open access to government-funded scientific works is both desirable and achievable.

The report carefully details a litany of deficiencies in the prevailing, subscription-based system by which most scientific and medical articles are published. “[T]he output from publicly funded research is handed free of charge to commercial organizations that appear increasingly to make it more difficult to gain access to publications derived from the same research,” the analysis notes, citing evidence from Research Councils UK. This state of affairs, the report concludes, is “unsatisfactory” and in need of “urgent” change -- a view that PLoS certainly shares.

One mechanism the Committee proposes for making scientific articles freely available is a network of “institutional repositories,” or locally-operated online archives, into which authors would be required to deposit their works. These repositories, the Committee suggests, “will enable readers to gain free access to journal articles whilst the publishing industry experiments with new publishing models, such as the [open access publication charge] model.”

It is worth noting that an Appropriations Committee of the United States House of Representatives recently passed a provision that would provide free access to works funded by the National Institutes of Health by a slightly different mechanism -- their mandatory deposition in PubMed Central, a single, centralized, free-to-use archive managed by the National Library of Medicine. While a centralized repository may offer several technological advantages over dispersed, locally managed repositories, at present, we are confident that any concerted effort by governments to make the results of publicly funded research freely available will ultimately have profound benefits for the general public, for scientists, and for science itself.

The House of Commons report also acknowledges that open access publishing is “a phenomenon that has already arrived” and addresses a number of common criticisms of the open access model. On the issue of global participation in the publishing enterprise, the report concludes that the open access model “would be extremely advantageous to researchers in developing countries, enabling them to keep abreast of research conducted elsewhere” and that “by scaling publication with research costs, the [open access] publishing model would ensure a fairer global distribution of the costs of publishing research findings.” On the issue of quality control and peer review, the Committee notes that “[i]n order to succeed, most author-pays publishers, like everyone else, will have to

publish articles of high quality,” echoing PLoS’ view that a journal’s economic model is largely independent of the stringency of its peer-review. On the issue of who should own the rights to publications resulting from government-funded projects, the report recommends that “higher education institutions are funded to enable them to assume control of copyright arising from their research.” On virtually all of these points, the Committee concludes that the various practices and policies of open-access publishers like PLoS are preferable to the practices and policies of more restrictive publishers.

The report specifically calls for actions from a number of organizations, governmental and otherwise. Two particularly notable recommendations are that the UK’s Research Councils “establish a fund to which their funded researchers can apply should they wish to publish their articles using the [open access publication charge] model”; and that the Government “provide limited financial assistance to encourage publishers and institutions” to conduct “further experimentation” with the open access publication model.

PLoS is extremely pleased with the Committee’s conclusions. The report accounts well for the wide spectrum of views that various stakeholders in scientific research expressed in the course of the comprehensive inquiry. Should the Committee’s recommendations be implemented, it will simply be a matter of time and fine-tuning before open access to the UK’s -- and likely the world’s -- scientific and medical literature becomes a reality.

**Related links:**

[House of Commons Science and Technology Committee Report](#)

[Submissions of evidence to House of Commons inquiry](#)

[PLoS evidence to the House of Commons inquiry](#)

[PLoS press release about the Committee Report](#)

[Further reading about open access](#)

**PLoS**

Public Library  
of Science

185 Berry Street  
Suite 1300  
San Francisco  
California 94107  
USA

p +1 415.624.1200  
f +1 415.546.4090  
[www.plos.org](http://www.plos.org)