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Open Letter on Access to research: the call for open access and the role of learned societies

Dear Dr Smits,

The European Public Health Association (EUPHA), a scientific based nongovernmental organisation publishing its own scientific journal (European Journal of Public Health), has read with interest the current calls for open access of all research, including the cOAlition S initiative and the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA). EUPHA supports open access to publicly funded scientific research. We accept that there should be a system whereby scientific data are openly accessible upon publication but contend that this should be decided within a wider review of systems for production, financing and dissemination of scientific publications, including a comprehensive assessment of the impact on all involved. In the proposal on how to realise open access and how to find the business model where publishers, universities, research funders and other players can agree on a fair division of costs and reasonable fees services, we believe that some important issues are missing:

We agree on open access, but the models to get there must be discussed by all stakeholders

EUPHA supports the principle of open access to research, but we do have some concerns with the document published on 11 July 2018, as some points are lacking. We are particularly concerned with the question of who pays for the publication of research and what role do the universities, libraries, and publishers play in a changed publication landscape. Today, most West European governmental research councils require immediate open access to publications resulting from the research they fund. Many contribute the necessary funding. Yet researcher funders in many countries, and many universities and other research organisations, do not have the means to pay for open access, but do feel the need to get access to journals and accept (however reluctantly) that they must pay for them. In seeking models allowing open access to scientific articles, we must not create a two tiered scientific society where rich countries and rich universities use open access journals to publish research, whereas others rely on subscription journals. We have seen estimates that all costs that libraries pay for subscriptions could well cover the cost that authors pay for open access. But the document does not discuss the fact that many scientific journals, and typically those run by scientific societies, do much more than simply act as a



platform for original research but add value with editorials, viewpoints, book reviews, and commentaries etc. Such material is of interest for readers, who would be willing to pay, but it is not clear who would pay for this if libraries move away from a subscription model. Although non-restrictive open access will lead to many research articles being easily available, it remains of utmost importance that published research is of high quality and has been peer-reviewed in an open and transparent manner. The downside of purely author paid publication has been a rise in numbers of commercial publishing sites draining author fees without delivering high quality review and publishing standards.

The timeline that is proposed for having all publicly funded research open access is ambitious. Journals will have to adapt and find new ways of organising their work. Researchers will have to consider this in the budgets of their research projects, some of which have already been granted and approved and that are running until after 2020, but will have not taken open access publication costs. Adjustments will have to be made by all stakeholders, hence a stepwise approach to open access is needed.

It is not poor access that is the problem; it is the research translation to policy and practice

Most “pure” open access journals and even more so open access repositories are instruments that publish research without paying much (or any) attention to the impact on policy and practice. Traditional journals include discussions and commentaries on the issues raised in original research papers, thus putting science in context (editorials, viewpoints, review papers, etc.). In this way, a more balanced discussion can take place and the translation of research into policy and practice can be enhanced. Thus, we believe that open access to scientific publications is only one among several issues in changing policy and practice and we must consider how to enhance the active involvement of researchers in the translation of research. Scientific societies play an important role in this area, and we are surprised that no role is given to scientific societies in the new publishing landscape.

Given these considerations, we would like to request that you take into account the following points, in the future debate on how to arrive at a system maximising access to scientific research and its translation into policy and practice:

1. Reinforcing inequalities

We know that there are already structural biases that reduce the probability that papers from poorer countries will be published. In the European context, the high fees that are charged for open access will make it even more difficult for papers from central and Eastern European countries to be published. Given the importance, in many fields such as public health, of taking into account national context, this will make it even more difficult to ensure that policies are relevant to national situations. It is not enough to say that “funding should be available” given the costs paid for subscription, but such transfer of costs are not easily made, especially in countries with weaker infrastructures for research. New business models need to be found that hold on global level, and relevant stakeholders need to collaborate to agree on terms and conditions for a generalized policy of open access to scientific publications.



2. Putting science into context

To put science in context we need journals that combine scientific papers with policy relevant editorials, commentaries and news. Scientific societies play an important role in this. Journals that are owned or co owned by scientific societies play a key role here.

3. Allow for different payment models

Since the document does not give a clear picture on who should pay for scientific publication (is it universities, libraries, research funders, authors, or others?), it seems reasonable not to opt for a specific payment model, such as all authors pay for open access. Hybrid journals may be one possibility to share costs between libraries and the research community, but the key issue is that all financial flows should be presented more transparently than is the case today.

The added value of a learned society

EUPHA has – since its inception in 1992 – striven for access to research for all our members, the national public health associations and their members in 45 European countries. At the same time, being part of EUPHA strengthens the collaboration with and between members and strengthens the role of our national public health associations in translating research to policy and practice. Throughout the years, we have facilitated both the founding and further development of national public health networks, especially in central and Eastern European countries.

Over many years, EUPHA has taken steps to facilitate easy access to our journal. The European Journal of Public Health allows open access after six months. Every research article published contains key points for policy (a short summary aimed at policymakers and practitioners). Our editor-in-chief selects one article in each published issue for open access, the selection being based on the importance of the research. We also allow for open access if indicated by the authors, making the European Journal of Public Health a hybrid journal. The European public health news section, combining EUPHA's hot topics with those of the WHO Regional office for Europe and the DG Sante of the European Commission, strengthens the function of our scientific journal. The new tool of E-collections provides three months open access to published articles combined with an editorial aimed at policymakers. In a totally author paid system, who would pay for these editorials, comments, etc.?

We contend that our proposals are going in the right direction. We will continue to advocate for clear and transparent translation of research into policy and practice, whilst at the same time preserving the added value of our scientific journal to our association. A short-term demand for open access for all will be detrimental to the efforts by EUPHA to promote European public health.

Yours sincerely on behalf of the EUPHA Executive Council,

Prof Peter Allebeck, editor-in-chief EJPH

Dr Dineke Zeegers Paget, executive director