Reviewer's report

Title: Open to the Public: Paywalls and the Public Rationale for Open Access Medical Research Publishing

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Reviewer: Rebecca Mead

Reviewer's report:

This is a very well written paper. It considers the merits of open access publishing of medical research from the perspective of members of the public. This is highly relevant to this journal and a valuable contribution to the wider debate on open access publishing. The authors highlight how public voices have largely been absent from this debate and that access to medical research remains largely focussed on institutional subscription. They go on to highlight that a large proportion of medical research is publically funded, which entails an obligation to disseminate findings as widely as possible. Further justifications for open access include enhancing public advocacy, an obligation to research participants and allowing patients to access the most up to date research. The paper ends by addressing some of the arguments against increasing the use of open access publishing.

Overall the paper provides a strong argument for the increasing use of open access, however there are two areas I think the paper could make small improvements. First, the introduction could make greater reference to the wider debate in academia, beyond the discipline of medical research, perhaps referencing the Finch report in 2012 and subsequent changes in government policy regarding publically funded research. This appears to be a significant development contributing to the disruption of the status quo in academic publishing. Second, the authors could provide a more balanced discussion on the argument of 'who will pay' for open access. The authors acknowledge the potential for creating a two-tier system in which publishing decisions are made on the basis of who can afford to pay. They suggest that shifting the financial burden to funders is one way of addressing this problem without discussing some of the potential problems. Here the relevance of acknowledging the wider academic debate becomes significant. While, the percentage of publically funded research in medical sciences may be high, this is not the case across all disciplines for example education and the social sciences. It may also negatively affect students who wish to publish from dissertations, as well as independent researchers. Finally, funders themselves will need to identify extra resources or limit research activities to accommodate this approach. In this vein, the authors could acknowledge that the entire academic publishing sector has been disrupted by the growth of open access publishing.
While this a positive step in terms of addressing inequality in access, systems and processes to mitigate against some of the potential negative consequences, such as exacerbating the existing inequality between publically funded and independent research, are still emerging during this period of flux. This article addresses an important issue, thank you for writing it.

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