



National Science and Technology Council
Task Force on Public Access to Scholarly
Publications

December 26, 2011

Dear Task Force Members:

I write to offer comment on the question of open access to the scientific literature. My views are based on five years of service as the Editor-in-chief of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, and now as the Editor-in-Chief of a new open access journal, eLife, sponsored by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI), the Wellcome Trust (WT) and the Max Planck Society (MPG). As an active investigator with over 35 years of experience in life science publishing and editing, I wish to express my strongest support for an official federal policy in support of open access to the literature. For most of my time in science, I would have argued that the scientific community was well-served by a mix of commercial and academic publishers, each satisfying a particular need of the community for work of general or specific interest. However, with the advent of online publication and the explosion of information from a burgeoning scientific enterprise, the need for rapid and complete access to the literature has grown to a point where a policy of open access must be adopted for all journals of record.

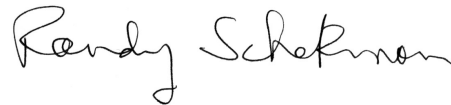
In my experience at PNAS and before that as an Associate Editor at the Journal of Cell Biology and the ASCB journal, Molecular Biology of the Cell, I found that a policy of free and open access two to six months post-publication was perfectly compatible with a business model that was revenue neutral (PNAS and MBoC) or which generated a small profit for the publisher (JCB). Unfortunately, commercial presses that rely on a subscription model of profit have not developed a business plan to accommodate the need for open access. Instead, through license fees that oblige the purchase of bundles of titles, the commercial presses have achieved unreasonable profit on the public investment in science and have forced cash-strapped university libraries to limit content to federally funded investigators.

In response to this challenge from the most prestigious publishers of life science research, the HHMI, WT and MPG have joined forces to start a new high-end life science journal that will be free to authors and all readers. These organizations accept publication expenses as part of their mandate and are unwilling to have publication access

limited to those institutions that can afford a site license. For some years now, investigators at HHMI and WT have been encouraged to publish in open access journals but this has not prompted the most selective journals to move in that direction. As a result, this new initiative, eLife, is intended to provide investigators and the entire life science community a vehicle for free exchange of work at the highest level of impact. In polling the attitudes of the investigators supported by HHMI, WT and MPG, we learned that a sizable majority of respondents (922/1052) consider open access from the moment of publication to be fairly or very important in their decision to submit a paper to the new journal.

Given the trends in publication and the explosion of knowledge in the life science community, I would argue that a federal policy to mandate publication in open access (immediate or rapid – two to six months – access) journals is in the best interests of science and the American public.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Randy Schekman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Randy Schekman, Professor
Molecular and Cell Biology, and
Investigator, Howard Hughes
Medical Institute