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Open Access and the Public Library of Medicine, Summary of a Presentation by Dr. Harold Varmus

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Summary: Open Access and the Public Library of Medicine, Summary of a Presentation by Dr. Harold Varmus, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center

Dr. Varmus opened his comments with a vignette regarding his own foray into the publishing world. Based upon his exposure to Cornell's arXiv.org, (the evolutionary result of Ginsparg's "e-print archives" for electronic research publications for physics materials), he eventually pursued similar means of electronic research publishing in the areas of biology and medicine. Though challenged by the academy, these efforts guided by accompanying constructive criticisms led to the development of PubMed Central(tm).

With a nod to the historical nature of libraries' provision of access to knowledge, he invoked Panizzi, Librarian of the British Museum from 1837 to 1866 with the following quote. "I want a poor student to have the same means of indulging his learned curiosity, of following his rational pursuits, of consulting the same authorities, of fathoming the most intricate enquiry as the richest man in the kingdom, as far as books go, and I contend that the Government is bound to give him the most liberal and unlimited assistance in this respect."

In the service spirit of Panizzi, Varmus went on to delineate the hallmarks of open-access electronic publications. In essence, that they are publications which are deposited in an online public repository immediately upon publication and also that they offer access to the widest array of users possible.

Varmus continued to frame open-access electronic publications as made feasible by nature of an enabling formula. The formula recognizes the advancement of information and communication technology coupled with the economies they provide, the potential for archiving and finally with the increased ease of access to both newer born-digital and older analog information. It is by exploitation of the potential afforded by this formula that libraries are able rise above the strangulating effects of his so-called "Gutenberg liabilities" inherent in traditional scholarly publishing.

The benefits and importance of open-access were detail by Varmus next. Increasing the audience of the author, providing barrier-free access to literature, extending the usefulness of the material itself, and broadening the scope and geographic breadth of work within the related discipline have all been benefits derived directly from open-access publishing.

With the concept of open-access properly framed and justified, Varmus moved on to

explore various principles underlying the costs and returns related to publication in the sciences. He pondered aloud why the cost of publication is not typically included as a basic cost of research where-by the results and distribution of them is an essential component. This concept aligns itself with the idea that scientific authors usually seek audience more-so than financial return. Additionally, since most scientific research is publicly funded, Varmus believes that that funding public should be offered easy and early access to the scientific research reports.

Varmus continued then to provide a picture of biomedical open-access publishing activities. Journals are more frequently being published digitally and the literature is also being digitally archived. These activities are now typically following open-access principles. He briefly described the bibliographic database, PubMed(tm) as well as its companion database PubMed Central(tm) which offers free, full-text access to biomedical research literature usually 2-12 months after initial publication.

Varmus discussed the related efforts of the Public Library of Science (PLoS) as an advocacy group and project in support of open-access publishing in the sciences. He described the success of PLoS Biology and PLoS Medicine, both started earlier this decade, as two examples of successfully competitive, stringently peer-reviewed free open-access scientific journals. The PLoS journal project was made possible by a \$9 million grant from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation. Other new journals, including PLoS Reports_ are in development. Varmus described the success of the PLoS open-access publishing project as a confluence of a viable business plan, a "sterling" staff and editors, and a widespread interest among scientists in turning interest in open-access into a activity that transcended traditional cultural barriers in scientific scholarly publishing. The digital archiving aspects of the program were most beneficial as well.

The economic viability of PLoS publishing model includes only one payment level; authors pay a one-time fee for publishing currently set at \$1500. Otherwise, advertising, philanthropy, and memberships provide ongoing financial support the venture.

Varmus noted little impact thus far on "big named" journals and is patient in waiting to see an impact on other for-profit and "Society" journals. In the mean time, the success breeds good company for other open-access journal projects. Currently it seems that the PLoS business model is working and further success will be measured as the disciplines see the most notable research moving over to the open-access publications.

In closing, Varmus urged support for PLoS and similar scholarly publishing projects by urging the audience to support open-access publishing initiatives with dollars

and discussion. It will be an uphill battle to realize a freedom from publisher profit margins and high subscription rates.