



## ***Presentation of William Rosner, M.D.***

DC conference on Open Access  
William Rosner, M.D.

I come to this conference with a point of view – let me reintroduce myself so that you can put my remarks in context. I'm a professor of Medicine at Columbia University, I conduct sponsored research, I care for patients with Endocrine disease, I teach, I edit a journal, I review manuscripts for a number of scientific publications, I am a member of the Council of the Endocrine Society and a past Chairperson of its publication committee. In short, I am a provider, disseminator, and a consumer of medical and scientific knowledge and have been responsible for its broadcast in all of its facets - scientific, ethical, and administrative. I care about its integrity, its persistent existence, and how it is paid for.

We are not here to discuss whether simple, inexpensive, or cost free widely available access to the scientific literature is worthwhile. No matter which of my hats I am wearing, I'm for it. I don't know anyone who isn't. Let's first deal with free dissemination in the framework of this discussion. Free does not exist and is not on anyone's agenda. There is no free. In my mind, the discussion reduces itself to three questions: how should the cost of scientific publication be borne? Does the present system need fixing, and if does, what are the repercussions of however one chooses to do that?

First, we need to talk about what's broken, how badly it's broken, if the breaks need repair, and, if they do, should change evolve, or do we need an upheaval? If we're going to change a system of great importance, that is truly excellent, but admittedly imperfect, we had better think it through carefully.

Let's spend just a moment reminding ourselves that the advent of the internet has created a major discontinuity in scientific publishing. Manuscripts can now be submitted, reviewed, accepted, and published online. Recent suggestions for changing our models for publication are based on this technology. Of course, established, not for profit publishers are availing themselves of this technology, at an exponentially increasing rate, to enhance and streamline their publishing models.

As best as I can tell, the public library of science is driven by the philosophy of simpler and more open access to the scientific literature. **“Immediate unrestricted access to scientific ideas, methods, results, and conclusions will speed the progress of science and medicine, and will more directly bring the benefits of research to the public.”** To achieve this goal they have created a new publishing model – the author rather than the reader pays. Since the premise deals with availability and access - we should note who has and does not have ready access -- those are the individuals hypothesized to receive a major benefit, which will pass through to society as whole, were our current system to be changed. I would argue that we already have open access. It may not be immediate – it may take as much as 10 minutes to get to where you need to be. If you are a working biological scientist in this or other Western countries, then you conduct your research at a University, at a government site, like the NIH, or in Industry. These entities already furnish you with simple, rapid access to the literature of science through their comprehensive libraries. I’m sure there are a few exceptions - very few – there always are. As I said, it appears to me we already have reasonably open access and what is being suggested here is more convenient access. That is, you don’t have to bother accessing your library, either on the internet or in person, but can get full text without this inconvenient step.

How about if you are an accountant, or a lawyer, or a journalist or whoever, and you want to know the details of some arcane bit of science. I would argue that the risks of revolutionizing the way we publish science are hardly worth the benefits of providing such information, at no cost to them, to the small intrepid group of laypersons who require this access. The information is not under lock and key; the fearless few non-scientists who want it - can pay for it – in much the same way that they pay for other sources of information in our society.

How about the clinical medical literature. Traditionally, the public depended upon the appropriate professionals as their source of knowledge. This tradition clearly has changed, with television, newspapers, and the internet supplementing, or in some instances supplanting, traditional sources of information. These media serve a valuable function. A new finding is published and responsible writers and broadcasters and web sites seek expert opinion to place that finding in context. Once again, those who wish to see the original, undigested data can obtain it they way they obtain other information in our society.

How about the unintended consequences of this revolutionary change. The worst consequences, of course, are always the ones we can’t anticipate, however there are some that we can. Not quite as important as the scientific literature as a means of communication, but of central import for scientific vigor and the open exchange of ideas, are the organizations in which scientists join together. They are multifunctional, and they too are not free. They are supported in various ways including dues, contributions, and in many cases revenues from journals and meetings. I’m most familiar with the Endocrine Society so let me give you a short list of the things we do. We publish four journals which rank in the top 1% of all journals in biology. The revenue, from subscriptions and advertising, supports a number of eleemosynary activities. We

provide scholarships to young scientists to attend scientific meetings, we give grants for high school students to spend a summer studying in the laboratory of a mentor, we have a speaker's bureau that provides lecture series, at no cost, to minority institutions, we provide health information to the public both on the internet and through printed materials, and we advocate both for research and endocrine health. None of the things we provide, at no cost to the recipients, are free. We pay for them with revenues from our journals. I think these and similar activities should not be threatened because it is too inconvenient to go to the library – either electronically or in person.

In sum, I think the premise that access to Science is too difficult and needs revolutionary improvement is seriously flawed. We are not suffering from inadequate access to the scientific literature; the arguments that flow from that faulty premise are simply irrelevant. PLOS and similar organizations are certainly entitled to promote their journals and publications in the publishing marketplace. If the model is good, it will be successful – if not it will go the way of old soldiers and fade away.