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NIH research to be open access

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WASHINGTON, DC - National Institutes of Health (NIH) director Elias Zerhouni indicated at a gathering of 43 scientific journal publishers and editors that eventually all NIH-financed research will be freely available to the public.

Zerhouni stopped short of setting deadlines for depositing full-text materials in the searchable PubMed database, as recommended in a House Appropriations Committee [report](#) released earlier this month. Instead, he asked the publishing executives to inform him how best to manage material so that the public can freely use it.

"The public needs to have access to what they've paid for," Zerhouni told commercial and nonprofit publishing executives at a meeting he called on the NIH campus. Congress, he said, also demanded evidence of the agency's productivity. "I need to manage the portfolio," he said. "The status quo just can't stand."

The executive conference was the first of several planned meetings that will lead to the creation of an approach public access, which NIH will publish in the Federal Register for comment before it becomes official policy, Zerhouni said. He would not say when the policy-making would begin, but the Appropriations Committee report requested that NIH produce some language by December 1.

That report recommended that papers resulting from NIH-funded research be deposited in PubMed 6 months after their publication in a journal. Papers for which NIH pays publishing costs would be deposited immediately upon publication. Last year, a member of Congress [introduced a bill](#) that would have banned copyright on all publications based on federally funded research; that bill has been in committee since last fall.

Several meeting participants expressed exasperation with the House report, which they termed a "government mandate." Paul W. Kincade, president of the Federation of American Societies of Experimental Biology, told us that he resented the "coercion." Others grumbled that the government couldn't tell publishers what to do.

"They were a little startled by the language," Pat Schroeder, president and executive director of the Association of American Publishers, explained diplomatically in the meeting. She likened the report's recommendations to the "federal government putting down its thumb."

But Zerhouni tried to assure participants that the government was not yet creating a mandate and that their views would be taken into account before the policy was finalized. He also distanced himself from the House report, saying that NIH did not prepare it, even though the wording was "inspired" by deliberations within the agency.

Beyond the policy-making process, the executives fretted that if all information is available in a government database, subscriptions will fall. Many executives reported that they are trying some forms of open access, making material available at no charge 6 months or a year after publication. But setting a single date could be harmful to some and not others, some said.

[Alan Leshner](#), chief executive officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which publishes *Science*, told Zerhouni that releasing articles 6 months after publication didn't worry him. "But if any part of the publication has been paid out of NIH grants... [it] must be given immediate open access... most of us in the room are much more concerned about that."

Brian D. Crawford, vice president and publishing director of Life and Medical Sciences for Wiley, predicted that under the proposed policy, journal numbers would dwindle, and more material would be published solely on the PubMed site. "This would lead to a constricted ability to publish," he added. "The unintended consequence for NIH could be less access, not more."

Judith Bond, president of the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, questioned PubMed's reliability and suggested NIH use multiple repositories. "PubMed Central has had a lot of technical problems," she added, questioning whether NIH would be technically prepared to meet the suggested mandate.

Zerhouni said that individual repositories tend to fade out. He also told participants that NIH had no intention of becoming a journal publisher and the public is aware of the value of journals' peer reviews.

Not all participating publishers were anxious about the proposed policy. *PNAS* editor-in-chief [Nicholas R. Cozzarelli](#) told Zerhouni that depositing material would be "no problem." "We would endorse it and see it as an advancement of science, and education," he added. "We can do it, other journals can do it. It will just take time."

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