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## Wellcome support for open access

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Britain's [Wellcome Trust](#) has thrown its support behind open-access publishing of scientific research, after a report it commissioned came to the conclusion that the publishing status quo does not operate in the interests of scientists or the public.

The trust, which plans to distribute more than £400 million (approximately \$662 million) in funding to biomedical sciences in the year 2003-2004, commissioned economic development consultants [SQW](#) to undertake a thorough investigation into the £22 billion (approximately \$36 billion) scientific publishing industry.

What it found was a clash of priorities among those involved - commercial publishers who want to better their business position, libraries who struggle to buy journals on tight budgets, and researchers who want their research published in reputable journals.

"The current market structure does not operate in the long-term interests of the research community," the [report](#) says.

[Mark Walport](#), director of the Wellcome Trust, said his organization is committed to ensuring that the results of the science it funds are disseminated widely and are freely available.

"Unfortunately, the distribution strategies currently used by many publishers prevent this," he said in a statement. "We want to see a system in place that supports open and unrestricted access to research outputs, and we would like to encourage others to support this principle."

In general terms, open-access publishing allows papers to be freely accessed, copied, distributed, and publicly displayed, subject to proper attribution of authorship. In both its commercial guise, as pioneered by BioMed Central, and the not-for-profit version being developed by, among others, the [Public Library of Science](#) (PLOS), open-access publishing is gaining increasing attention in the current international debate about scholarly communication. It is one option for making research more visible and reducing the cost to academia of journal subscriptions.

The trust released a position statement to coincide with the report, saying it welcomed the establishment of "free-access, high-quality scientific journals available via the Internet."

It also said it would meet the cost of publication charges for trust-funded researchers by letting them use contingency funds. Instead of charging readers, open-access publishers charge researchers or their institutions a fee to publish.

Some [critics](#) say that scientists will balk at paying upfront fees, which will probably come from their grants and will mean less money for other laboratory activities, while proponents say that the fees are competitive with the "page charges" that some journals already charge for color images and the like.

Between 1995 and 1999, more than 16,000 research papers cited the Wellcome Trust as one of their sources of funding, according to a study carried out by the trust itself. A spokeswoman told us that the trust already awards contingency funds that allow researchers to contribute to page charges, "which can

be quite substantial in the current publishing model." There are no plans at present to increase those funds to cover the costs of open-access charges, she said.

By commissioning the new report, the Wellcome Trust said, it wanted to stimulate a dialogue among the various players to address "concerns" it has regarding current publishing practices. Electronic publishing had already transformed the way research is communicated, Walport said, with a prime example being the Human Genome Project.

"The model of the [Human Genome Project](#) need not be unique, and it is the principle of free access that we want to champion. The fundamental point is that as a research funder, we have to question whether it is right that we, and others, are in the position of having to pay to read the results of the research that we fund."

Peter Suber, an open-access advocate at Earlham College in Richmond, Ind., said the Wellcome Trust was in a key position to change the way medical research is funded and published.

"When the Wellcome Trust decides to support open-access publishing, that's a strong endorsement of open access that should carry weight with holdouts who are intrigued by the promise of open access, but undecided about its economics," he told us.

"It also means that a lot of important medical research in the near future will be openly accessible, which is very good news for the acceleration of progress, growth of knowledge, sharing of results, and treatment of patients."

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