

Open-access journal *eLife* to start charging fees

Journal backed by world's largest private research funders will still depend on grants to cover expenses.

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29 September 2016

The open-access journal *eLife* is dropping one of its most distinctive features: free publishing. From 2017, it will charge a fee of \$2,500 for all accepted papers.

Most open-access journals already charge for publishing, because they have few other ways to bring in cash. But *eLife*, which launched in 2012, has until now had its expenses covered by grants from three of the world's largest private research funders: the Howard Hughes Medical Institute in Chevy Chase, Maryland; the Wellcome Trust in London; and the Max Planck Society in Berlin.

These backers want to create an elite online journal that can compete for authors' best papers against leading subscription publications (such as *Nature*, *Science* and *Cell*), yet still be open access. The three funders set up the non-profit *eLife* organization, and have [committed to provide it with £43 million](#) (\$56 million) over 10 years.

The journal now needs another revenue stream to put its publishing business on a more sustainable footing as the number of papers that it receives increases, says its executive director Mark Patterson, in Cambridge, UK. But *eLife* will still rely heavily on its grants, he says. By charging some fees, *eLife* will be able to scale up its publishing operations and free up grant money to develop open-source tools for the research community. "Publishing science is a core activity, but it's not all that we do," he says.

The journal's decision to start charging might mean that it loses some prospective authors, notes Kent Anderson, the former publisher of *Science* and now chief executive of the analytics firm RedLink in Westborough, Massachusetts. But Nick Golding, an epidemiologist at the University of Melbourne in Australia, says the new charge won't put him off submitting manuscripts to *eLife*, which has published five of his articles since 2014. "Of all the journals I've published with, *eLife* has impressed me the most. It's often difficult to find open access fees, but *eLife* is one journal I'd be very happy to pay for," he says.

Pick a fee, any fee

Open-access journals charge a wide variety of fees — a range that has sparked [fierce debate over how much scientists should or could pay to publish a scientific paper](#). Highly selective open-access journals that reject most of their submitted papers tend to have higher operating expenses, and *eLife*, which last year accepted 15.4% of submissions, falls into that category.

The decision to ask for \$2,500 puts *eLife* in the range typically charged by other open-access journals, Patterson says, such as those published by the Public Library of Science. And it is lower than those charged by competitors such as *Science Advances* (\$4,600) and *Nature Communications* (\$5,200).

Unusually for scientific publishers, *eLife* is transparent about its publishing costs and has posted [detailed accounts](#) of how it arrived at its fee. The charge does not cover all of *eLife*'s expenses; rather, it will cover 'marginal costs' — those that increase with each new paper the journal receives. These include salaries for scientific editors and staff who handle papers, payments for the third-party systems that process articles, and fee waivers for authors who lack sufficient funding to pay.

The journal will still depend on its backers to pay what it terms fixed costs, such as for technology platforms, infrastructure, marketing and other staff. The total publishing cost per article in 2017, *eLife* estimates, will be around £3,085.

That estimate deliberately excludes a large chunk of the organization's expenses — around 22% last year — that go to what *eLife* calls "technology and innovation" activities, including the development of an open-source scientific publishing web platform, website redesigns and a partnership to develop open-source publishing tools.

Some publishers think that *eLife* should include these expenses in its estimates of per-paper costs, on the grounds that they are an integral part of publishing, says Anderson. But Patterson replies that publishers take different approaches as to how to account for such costs in author charges.

Anderson says that now that *eLife* has entered the crowded market of fee-charging open-access journals, he is not convinced that its offering will set it apart from competitors. “We have pricing- and value-based horse races now in the open-access market, and *eLife* is taking a lane. I don't see anything to suggest it will lap the field.”

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2016.20700

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Mike Taylor · 2016-09-30 09:12 AM

This is rather misleading. What eLife has done here is exactly what it has been explicitly saying it was going to do from the very beginning. For example, eLIFE's very early news post [Mark Patterson Named Managing Executive Editor of New Open Access Journal](#) on 10 October 2011 said:

For an initial period, to help establish the journal, no fees will be charged to authors. Once the journal is established, it is anticipated that authors will be charged an article processing fee to cover some of the ongoing costs of publication.

