

Position statement by the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology

ASBMB Response to PubMed Central and the Public Library of Science Boycott
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The publication of *Journal of Biological Chemistry* (*JBC*) On-line in 1995 by the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (ASBMB) and our partner, Stanford University's HighWire Press, initiated efforts to grant broad, barrier-free access to the literature. Over the past 3 years, we have released the back issues of *JBC* On-line free to anyone with Internet access after an average of 6 months from the initial publication date. Furthermore, in 2000, we initiated *JBC* Papers in Press which releases all accepted *JBC* papers on the day they are accepted and they remain free forever to anyone with Internet access. Lastly, we have initiated a program of free access to all *JBC* papers for scientists in economically developing countries in order to broaden access worldwide. ASBMB has been a leader in making the research literature more accessible to everyone because that is the mission of our Society.

Recently, there has been a great deal of discussion about a proposal from the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) of the NIH to build and provide a freely accessible repository of life science research literature called PubMed Central (PMC). In addition, PMC has been vigorously promoted by a group calling themselves The Public Library of Science (PLS). The PLS has circulated a letter that sets criteria for journals to comply with or face a boycott by the signatories. PLS proposes:

"To encourage the publishers of our journals to support this endeavor, we pledge that, beginning in September, 2001, we will publish in, edit or review for, and personally subscribe to, only those scholarly and scientific journals that have agreed to grant unrestricted free distribution rights to any and all original research reports that they have published, through PubMed Central and similar online public resources, within 6 months of their initial publication date."

Clearly the PMC objective to build a freely accessible repository for the biomedical literature is laudable and in apparent agreement with goals of the ASBMB and the *JBC*.

Yet ASBMB/*JBC* is not considered in compliance with the demands of the PLS and we are thus a target of the boycott effort. Since *JBC* Papers in Press and *JBC* back issues are available free, why are we not in compliance? This is because imbedded in the statement above is a more subtle condition: "...that have agreed to grant unrestricted free distribution rights to any and all original research reports that they have published, through PubMed Central and similar on-line public resources...."

What does this mean? It means that in order to comply with the PLS demands, journals must not only make their content free but also transfer all their free content to PMC and allow, through PMC, anyone, presumably even those who would then sell our content, "unrestricted free distribution rights". The PLS boycott proponents argue that as long as the free research reports are retained solely at the publisher's web site they are not "free" and remain "under publisher control". Yet the ASBMB and many other targets of the boycott are non-profit society publishers, under the control of scientists who are the authors and readers, reviewers and editors of the articles being published.

ASBMB has decided that, while committed to barrier-free access to our research papers, we will not transfer our free content to PubMed Central. There are several reasons for this decision that have nothing to do with wanting to retain "control" of the content which we already make freely available. The "unrestricted free distribution" requirement concerns us because there is no mechanism to insure the fidelity and integrity of the re-distributed material. Inadvertent alteration of the *JBC* research record can easily happen in repeated transfer from one site to another. Those who have experience with commercial research consolidators who re-publish papers from various journals and sell them at their Web sites understand the problems that re-publication/redistribution can create.

Also worrisome is the possibility that anyone could deliberately alter research reports for any purpose and readers could never be confident that the reproduced material was authentic or accurate. Furthermore, a PMC site that contains only the older articles is only a part of the *JBC*. Scientists won't be well served by segregating the older literature from the current literature. Further, the articles that are re-posted by PMC won't have the same hyperlinks to free full text of cited references in the article. The *JBC* On-line is the only complete and integrated journal view of all the published content of the *JBC* since 1995; a project is now underway to add 15 more years of back content to the *JBC* On-line site all of which will be free.

Other concerns about PMC persist as well. The PMC staff assert that all the research reports must be on one server or system in order to implement novel "dynamic" search tools. Yet there has never been any description of the tools they have developed or why the papers must be at one site in order to be searched. Additionally, PMC offers to serve as the digital archive for the biomedical literature, which could indeed be a useful service. Archiving digital material remains a very difficult challenge but the PMC offer again has little description of the archiving procedures. Do they have the endorsement of librarians and archivists? Will the archive last 500 years? Moreover, we are concerned about the technical reliability of PMC. PMC has been operating for over a year and as of March 2001 only about 10 journals have their papers posted at PMC. For some of those who have participated, there have been technical problems. Furthermore, PubMed, as opposed to PMC, has also recently had problems in posting citations for new papers resulting in over a month delay to the consternation of authors and readers. This performance record does not instill confidence that the PMC effort will be technically sound and reliable.

There are also questions, both practical and of principle, about whether one large government agency is an appropriate place to house the world's biomedical literature. Practically, can PMC store and distribute the thousands of biomedical journals that currently exist? Will the NIH, as a consequence of government oversight, be restricted in what kinds of research can be posted in PMC? Is a single central repository obsolete in the age of the World Wide Web with transparent linkage between different sites? Lastly, is it appropriate for a taxpayer supported government agency to compete with non-profit society publishers?

We are pleased that PMC shares our key objective to provide free access to the biomedical literature but because of our concerns about the technical performance of PMC, their unwillingness to fully disclose their specific plans and programs and the potential redistribution problems, we have proposed that we would utilize the strengths of the Web and participate by linking from the PMC site to the *JBC* site. This proposal has been repeatedly rebuffed.

Finally, if one objective of PMC is to collect large numbers of biomedical journals at one site in order to facilitate searching, such a large collection already exists at [Stanford University's HighWire Press](#) co-publisher of *JBC* On-line. HighWire Press currently hosts on-line editions of 240 journals including most of the journals now participating in PMC and over 40 of the 100 most-frequently-cited science journals in the world, including journals such as *Science*, *JBC*, *PNAS*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Cancer Research*, *Circulation*, *Journal of Clinical Investigation*, *EMBO Journal*, *Blood*, *Journal of Cell Biology*, *Journal of Experimental Medicine*, *Journal of Virology*, *American Journal of Physiology*, *Journal of Neuroscience*, *Journal of Immunology*, and *Molecular Biology of the Cell*.

This translates into about 250,000 free research reports. They have developed new search tools and several archiving proposals are currently being explored. HighWire Press will continue to provide the biomedical community broad, barrier-free access to the world's largest digital research library of the biomedical sciences.

We hope that *JBC* authors, readers, editors, reviewers and subscribers recognize and appreciate our efforts to serve the world's biological sciences community as broadly as possible, and will continue to show the loyalty, support and trust that we have enjoyed in the past.