

BMJ OPEN

Large medical research funders committed to open access publishing

But smaller medical charities, although keen, fear impact on budgets and funded researchers

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Large medical research funding bodies are fully committed to open access publishing. But although smaller charitable funders back the principle, they worry about the impact open access will have on their budgets and their funded researchers, reveals a qualitative study published in the online journal **BMJ Open**.

The findings come as Open Access Week (October 21-27), a global annual event to promote open access as the norm in scholarly publishing and research, celebrates its seventh year in business.

The premise of open access is that it provides free, immediate, online access to the results of scholarly research, and ideally, the right to use and reuse those results as desired, rather than restricting access behind a subscription pay wall. The UK leads the world on open access.

Semi-structured interviews about open access policies and preferences were carried out with 12 employees at 10 UK biomedical research funding bodies in the Spring of this year in the public, charitable, and commercial sectors.

The results showed that all three sectors back open access, but that while public and charitable funders have clear policies on it, commercial sector funders don't tend to.

Most funders are happy to support the "gold" route, whereby a study's publication is paid for out of a research grant to cover the journal's costs. This is the model used by BMJ Open and the other open access titles published by BMJ.

But funders said that not all publishers have embraced open access; many are resisting it and are either reluctant to move away from traditional publishing or are using it purely as a means to boost income.

Open access also seemed to be part of a funder's overall mission - that is, improving health, healthcare, patient outcomes, and patients' lives - although for many of the charitable funders, this had to be balanced against other types of public communication and support for people living with medical conditions.

But the way in which a funder gets its income influences its attitude to open access. Charities, which rely on public donations, had to be able to justify their costs and make the best use of available cash for all their competing objectives.

But research funders across the board were worried about the escalating costs of open access as the gold route becomes more mainstream and the cost of publishing shifts from institutions to funders.

This is of particular concern to the smaller charitable funders, who have historically not covered off these costs in their overheads, and fear they will need to stump up the additional costs required.

Other key findings:

- Funders find it hard to monitor compliance with open access, as a condition of funding; compliance rates vary enormously.
- Sanctions for breaching funding conditions are not harsh in the belief that it is more important to encourage researchers to comply rather than to punish them when they don't.
- Research funders are turning their attention to other priorities for publication, including data sharing, research protocols, and negative results, which are not always favoured by more traditional outlets.

Sharmila Nebhrajani, Chief Executive of the Association of Medical Research Charities commented: "The public choose to donate to medical research charities to fund research into new treatments and cures, and they want their money to make a difference. To [do this], charities want everyone to be able to learn from their research findings, which is why they support the principle of open access."

But this involved upfront costs, which were not always easy for charities to justify because of competing funding needs, she said.

"To make the biggest difference for their patients and supporters, funding open access may not be the best decision for all charities right now. We need to create an environment where it can be," she said.

"This means prices that are clear and competitive so that charities can get the best deal and show how they are investing their donations to make a difference," she explained.