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Editorial & News Contacts
North America 1200 New York Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20005 Editorial: 202-326-6501, FAX 202-289-7562 News: 202-326-6500, FAX 202-371-9227 • Bureaus: Berkeley, CA: 510-652-0302, FAX 510-652-1867, San Diego, CA: 760-942-3252, FAX 760-942-4979, Chicago, IL: 312-360-1227, FAX 312-360-0537, Pacific Northwest: 541-342-6290
Europe Headquarters: Bateman House, 82-88 Hills Road, Cambridge, UK CB2 1LQ; (44) 1223-326500, FAX (44) 1223-326501 Paris Correspondent: (33) 1-49-29-09-01, FAX (33) 1-49-29-09-00
Asia News Bureau: Dennis Normile, (81) 3-3335-9925, FAX (81) 3-3335-4898; dnormile@twics.com • Japan Office: Asca Corporation, Eiko Ishioka, Fusako Tamura, 1-8-13, Hirano-cho, Chuo-ku, Osaka-shi, Osaka, 541 Japan; (81) 6-202-6272, FAX (81) 6-202-6271; asca@os.gulf.or.jp • China Office: Hao Xin, (86) 10-6255-9478; science@public3.bta.net.cn • India correspondent: Pallava Bagla, (91) 11-271-2896; pbagla@ndb.vsnl.net.in

Just a Minute, Please

Floyd E. Bloom

It cannot have escaped readers' attention that the director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Harold Varmus, proposes to create an all-encompassing online electronic archive for biomedical research data, called E-biomed. In its 5 May 1999 iteration and 20 June addendum, parts of the oft-changing plan would be partly modeled on the Los Alamos National Laboratory ePrint Server and would create an electronic repository for life science research. The plan, addendum, and reactions from some 200 respondents are accessible at http://www.nih.gov/welcome/director/ebiomed/ebiomed.htm.

How would it work? There would be two modes of submission: one through cooperating journals and the other directly to the E-biomed site without peer review. An advisory board would set general policies as well as rules for submission to the repository of unreviewed reports. The stated goals of the E-biomed proposal are to provide free access to research results for all and to take full advantage of electronic formats. Proponents acknowledge that cooperating journals could lose subscription income and suggest that journals recover their costs through submission and acceptance fees charged to authors. E-biomed may be free to users, but it will not be free to taxpayers or authors submitting through peer review.

"*Science* ... [is] eager to identify the advantages of the E-biomed proposal ... "

Would it work? The e-mail expressions of support and dissent received so far by NIH show no clearly predominant view. Editorial assessments in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (see http://www.nejm.org/content/1999/0340/0023/1828.asp), *Wall Street Journal*, and *New York Times* reflect very serious concerns about the proposal. To be sure, there is also much support from quarters long known to advocate a more open scientific literature that would banish the alleged cabals of editors, biased reviewers, and expensive commercial presses with generally irrelevant content.

Lurking behind the public discussions are some potentially troubling elements: What if the major journals choose not to cooperate out of concern that their ability to survive and maintain quality control and timeliness are threatened by the diversion of authors and competent reviewers into the NIH system? Will societies whose members' future careers rely on NIH funding be willing to resist the cooptation of their journals' editorial and peer review systems? What will the real costs be to authors, peer-reviewed journals, and scientific societies? Does a monopolistic archive under government control by the major research funder enhance scientific progress better than the existing journal hierarchy, which provides multiple alternatives to authors and readers? What about research in disciplines outside what the National Library of Medicine considers biomedical? What about research not sponsored by NIH or even U.S. federal funds? Without answers to these and other questions, it is hard to determine the feasibility of the proposal.

Tell us what you think about E-biomed via our new dEbate feature for readers' responses at http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/summary/285/5425/197

Science and other journals are eager to identify the advantages of the E-biomed proposal and are actively looking for changes that could benefit scientific publishing. For example, the E-biomed server would provide a venue for online publication of negative results and thus allow others to avoid experimental repetition. On the other hand, if NIH really wants to improve access to the literature, they could digitize the peer-reviewed literature published before 1995. In addition, all would benefit if NIH developed software for online journal submittals and provided access to a common search engine that could survey all peer-reviewed sciences across all journal lines.

It may be instructive to recall an earlier congressional reaction, as Albert Henderson, editor of *Publishing Research Quarterly* did in his response to E-biomed on 6 May. In the Sputnik aftermath, an E-biomed–like proposal was made that Congress accelerate U.S. scientific research by establishing a unified information system similar to what had been created in the Soviet Union. The Senate's advisory panel responded: "The case for a Government-operated, highly centralized type of center can be no better defended for scientific information services than it could be for automobile agencies, delicatessens, or barber shops." Surely other creative solutions can be found to what NIH considers problems. Are they prepared to listen, or is this a done deal?