Medical Xpress

Zika emergency puts open data policies to the test

February 11 2016, by Larry Peiperl

The Zika outbreak comes at a time of ongoing advances in data sharing policy, including a new call by the Wellcome Trust for journals and research funders to support open sharing of Zika research. *PLOS Medicine* Chief Editor Larry Peiperl and *PLOS NTDs* co-Editor-in-Chief Peter Hotez call on researchers to make full use of these opportunities.

The spreading epidemic of Zika virus, with its putative and alarming

associations with Guillain-Barre syndrome and infant microcephaly, has arrived just as several initiatives have come into place to minimize delays in sharing the results of scientific research.

In September 2015, in response to concerns that research publishing practices had delayed access to crucial information in the Ebola crisis, the World Health Organization convened a consultation "in recognition of the need to streamline mechanisms of data dissemination—globally and in as close to real-time as possible" in the context of public health emergencies.

Participating medical journal editors, representing *PLOS*, *BMJ* and *Nature* journals and *NEJM*, provided a statement that journals should not act to delay access to data in a public health emergency: "In such scenarios, journals should not penalize, and, indeed, should encourage or mandate public sharing of relevant data…"

In a subsequent Comment in *The Lancet*, authors from major research funding organizations expressed support for data sharing in public health emergencies. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), meeting in November 2015, lent further support to the principles of the WHO consultation by amending ICMJE "Recommendations" to endorse data sharing for public health emergencies of any geographic scope.

Credit: James Gathany, Wikimedia Commons

Now that WHO has declared Zika to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, responses from these groups in recent days appear consistent with their recent declarations.

The ICMJE has announced that "In light of the need to rapidly understand and respond to the global emergency caused by the Zika virus, content in ICMJE journals related to Zika virus is being made free to access. We urge other journals to do the same. Further, as stated in our Recommendations, in the event of a public health emergency (as defined by public health officials), information with immediate implications for public health should be disseminated without concern

that this will preclude subsequent consideration for publication in a journal."(www.icmje.org, accessed 9 Feburary 2016)

WHO has implemented special provisions for research manuscripts relevant to the Zika epidemic that are submitted to WHO Bulletin; such papers "will be assigned a digital object identifier and posted online in the "Zika Open" collection within 24 hours while undergoing peer review. The data in these papers will thus be attributed to the authors while being freely available for reader scrutiny and unrestricted use" under a Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY IGO 3.0).

At *PLOS*, where open access and data sharing apply as matter of course, all *PLOS* journals aim to expedite peer review evaluation, pre-publication posting, and data sharing from research relevant to the Zika outbreak. *PLOS* Currents Outbreaks offers an online platform for rapid publication of preliminary results, *PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases* has committed to provide priority handling of Zika reports in general, and other *PLOS* journals will prioritize submissions within their respective scopes. The *PLOS* Zika Collection page provides central access to relevant and continually updated content from across the *PLOS* journals, blogs, and collaborating organizations.

Today, the Wellcome Trust has issued a statement urging journals to commit to "make all content concerning the Zika virus free to access," and funders to "require researchers undertaking work relevant to public health emergencies to set in place mechanisms to share quality-assured interim and final data as rapidly and widely as possible, including with public health and research communities and the World Health Organisation." Among 31 initial signatories are such journals and publishers as *PLOS*, Springer *Nature*, *Science* journals, The *JAMA* Network, *eLife*, *The Lancet*, and *New England Journal of Medicine*; and funding organizations including Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, UK Medical Research Council, US National Institutes of Health, Wellcome

Trust, and other major national and international research funders.

This policy shift prompts reconsideration of how we publish urgently needed data during a public health emergency. It could also help to advance discussions on eventual departure from traditional biomedical journal publishing, a model that remains remarkably unchanged from its origins in 17th Century Europe. Public health emergencies expose two persistent hallmarks of this model that current technologies could help relegate to history: first, the assumption that significant academic contributions are limited solely to by-line authorship of traditional journal publications, and second, the requirement for lengthy, private review and re-review that unduly delay the availability of critically important study results.

In the meantime, the institutions that support and disseminate research stand ready. Only through the willing participation of research scientists, however, can the community realize the potential value of policies that support openness. We encourage researchers to make full use of the resources that journals, funders, and international organizations have provided to facilitate early and rapid sharing of the data that will lead to better understanding of this emergency and mitigate its potentially disastrous impact on human lives.

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