



A Medical Journal Online



By William Peniston, MD

EARLY LAST YEAR, I DISCOVERED the Public Library of Science (www.plos.org), "a non-profit organization of scientists and physicians committed to making the world's scientific and medical literature a freely available public resource." The site looked interesting, so I put it in my "favorites" and promptly forgot it. In October 2003, PLoS began publishing its first online journal, PLoS Biology. Now PLoS Medicine is available (<http://medicine.plosjournals.org>).

In the first issue, the founders state their reasons for starting the journal in an article "*PLoS Medicine - A Medical Journal for the Internet Age*." Here is an edited sampling:

"The Internet is awash with medical information. Eight hundred million people have direct access to the Internet, and in the United States over 60% have searched for health or medical information.... Go to any search engine... and you will be directed to hundreds of sites.... Google "medical" and you get 85 million pages, "drug," 40 million, and "health," 230 million."

"Everything published in *PLoS Medicine* is immediately freely available online throughout the world, with no restrictions on distribution, copying, printing, or legitimate use. Of course, it costs us money to publish this journal, and we must cover our expenses... Instead of charging readers for access to our journal, we ask the authors of accepted research articles to pay a publication fee to cover the costs of peer review, editorial oversight, and production. This 'open access' business model ensures our financial health as a publisher while allowing us to convey everything we publish to the widest possible audience."

"We do not expect authors to cover publication costs personally - rather, we expect the government agencies, companies, foundations, research institutions, hospitals, or universities that sponsor the research to pay the fee.... Virtually every leading sponsor of medical research has announced its willingness to pay for open-access publication..."

"To ensure that we don't replace a barrier to access with barriers to publication, we've raised money to cover the publication costs of articles whose authors are unable to pay them. And, for every PLoS journal, an author's ability to pay will never be a consideration in our decision to publish an article." (My italics)

"The world of medical journals needs a fresh infusion of idealism. All of today's leading medical journals are more than 70 years old, and *PLoS Medicine* is here to challenge the status quo. We are first and foremost an open-access publisher working to ensure that everyone has access to the latest medical research and expertise."

I have now perused the magazine several times. My first reaction was excitement. The second time around, I felt there was an oversupply of articles on research and rare diseases. I have a strong feeling this will change with time. Of the 10 most read articles in the November issue, the first two were, "A National Health Insurance Program for the United States," and "Short Sleep Duration Is Associated with Reduced Leptin, Elevated

Ghrelin, and Increased Body Mass Index."

The table of contents is divided into these categories: Editorial, Synopses, The PLoS Medicine Debate, Essays, Neglected Diseases, Perspectives, Health in Action, Policy Forums, Research in Translation, and Research Articles. All articles can be viewed as Full Text, Print PDF, and Screen PDF. As appropriate, some articles also have Figures, Tables, and Audio and Video available for separate viewing. As desired, download in PDF is available for the cover image, magazine section, magazine synopses only, research section, and the complete magazine.

To write this article, I spent considerably more time at the web site than in all my previous visits, and I find my interest has been rekindled. But it seemed wise to try to determine how non-medical people might react to the magazine. I asked seven persons, whom I consider of greater than average intelligence, to answer a short list of questions, and received responses from six. For the first five questions I asked for a rating from 0-10; for the last two, I asked for a simple "yes" or "no." Unfortunately, they didn't all comply so I gave a "no" a rating of "0" and a "yes" a rating of "10." Here are the averages:

1-Was the magazine pleasing to the eye/attractive? 6 (One "no" said, "too busy")

2-Was it "user friendly"/easy to negotiate? 8

3-Did the editorials and debates seem interesting? 8 (No response from two)

4-Will you visit the site again? 9

5-Do you think with time, after the magazine develops a larger database, the magazine will be more interesting/useful to the public? 10 (Four said "yes," with one adding, "if language slanted more to layman")

6-Did you search for anything? 5 yes, 1 no.

7-Were you able to find it? 2 yes, 3 no, 1 N/A.

Two comments by my non-medical reviewers were interesting enough to include here:

"This publication...should be a valuable means for making responsible medical information available to the lay public. The Issue Highlights and the Top Ten Listings provide means for quickly spotting articles that one may be interested in."

"I believe that the technical level is beyond the education level for many of the web surfers. It was well written at a level that I could understand and I added it to my Favorites so I can return to it."

This online magazine is very interesting, and I believe it holds great promise for the future.

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