



ASIP Public Affairs

[1999 ASIP Response to NIH E-Biomed Proposal](#)

May 13, 1999

Harold E. Varmus, M.D., Director
National Institutes of Health
9000 Rockville Pike
Building 1, Room 126
Bethesda, MD 20892

Dear Dr. Varmus:

The American Society for Investigative Pathology is pleased to respond to your E-Biomed proposal. The Society is excited by the prospect of a centralized biomedical pre-print server, but is quite concerned about the feasibility of the peer-reviewed component of E-Biomed. Representing the membership, the councilors of the Society were asked to comment on the proposal and I have summarized below our collective views.

Pre-Print Server: The Society fully supports the notion of a pre-print server ("E-Biomed general repository") as a tool for improving the speed and circulation of advances in research. It is suggested that care be taken to consider the possible ramifications of universal access, especially as it concerns clinical material and the "lay" community. The potential liability of misuse of information could well occur and must be guarded against.

Single Search Engine: This feature is very appealing to the Society. However, it seems that there is no model for the extremely large amount of data that would have to be managed in biomedicine. The Los Alamos server has been referred to, but it does not have the volume of input that biomedicine would. Our Society receives 1,300 original articles a year to review for publication in "The American Journal of Pathology". A straw poll of other FASEB societies indicated that they (as a group) would constitute about 30,000 original articles per year. Clearly, the volume of new manuscripts submitted to the E-Biomed server might exceed 100,000, annually. The ability of any one organization to manage such a large volume of material is itself a challenge. Since many of the premier biomedical journals are already online, a somewhat less ambitious but potentially beneficial objective would be to develop a search engine that effectively finds current electronically published articles. In any case, it is recommended that much effort and attention be directed to novel approaches to create search engines that will assist researchers in navigating the material.

Archival Function: The Society strongly endorses the NIH's efforts to create a central archive for complex data sets and other progressive modes of storing information, such as videos. The NIH has demonstrated success in this area with GenBank and is a logical choice for archiving other materials responsibly and effectively.



Peer-Review: The Society recognizes the continuous need for improvements to the process of peer review, but believes that the current mode of peer review (with the Society actively governing the process for its publications) should be the basis of any future refinements. Furthermore, the Society is concerned that an officially-sanctioned review group (such as the proposed Governance Board) would reduce the number of outlets and independent voices heard within the scientific community without necessarily improving the quality of decision making. Indeed, the present grant process in large part relies on the peer-review services provided by societies (as publishers), as well as commercial publishers and the Institute for Scientific Information, for the structure of merit given to publications. It is recommended that this part of the proposal be reconsidered, perhaps to the extent that it focus more on the potential to interface directly with publishers, in a manner similar to the Los Alamos server.

Financing: While everyone welcomes "low-cost, barrier-free access" to biomedical literature, the Society is deeply concerned that this important aspect of the proposal has not been developed realistically. This is a significant weakness of the proposal and much more effort needs to be expended to clearly understand the costs for the server to be developed and maintained. It is strongly recommended that the NIH prepare and provide a detailed budget to the scientific community. Such a budget should be based on sound projections before the feasibility of this proposal can be fully addressed. If the server were to evolve into a means of electronic distribution of accepted publications, there would be costs incurred to standardize the language and nomenclature, as there presently is in print. In the Society's experience, such redaction costs alone constitute 50% of its printing expenses. There are other costs, as well. While the Society shares your concerns about the amount of authors' potential research money that is devoted to publication costs, the processes of peer review and publication by any mode require a means of cost-recovery. It is essential that NIH buttress the claim of "cost-free access for potential readers of E-Biomed" with appropriate data.

Long-Term Outlook: Although the NIH's willingness to initiate the project is commendable, the NIH has a responsibility to make it sustainable. To this end, the Society asks the following questions: Is this the best use of NIH funds? Should funding of E-Biomed be a priority over research grant funding? In bad years, will the NIH reduce resources to this program to preserve research funding? Who will then sustain the effort? Does the NIH have the ability to react to unforeseen market forces that will undoubtedly occur? With a virtual monopoly, will NIH have any incentive to innovate and use new technologies as they become available? Should more consideration be given to organizing the existing electronic efforts of publishers to achieve the goals of the proposal (for example, NIH-sponsored grants to societies to underwrite the cost of electronic submission, publication, and translation of prior years into a digital form, potentially making these resources available free to researchers)?

I hope the comments of the membership of ASIP are helpful to the development of a successful and enduring system. I look forward to observing the proposal's progress and a continuing dialog on this very important issue.

Sincerely,
Vinay Kumar, M.D.
President
American Society for Investigative Pathology



The American Society for Investigative Pathology www.asip.org

9650 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20814-3993

Society E-mail: ASIP@pathol.faseb.org

ASIP Web Site: www.asip.org

AJP Web Site: <http://www.amjpathol.org>

The original proposal, and several responses, are posted on the NIH web site
at: <http://www.nih.gov/welcome/director/ebiomed/ebiomed.html>