

The Open Access Interviews: Dove Medical Press

6th November 2008

Richard Poynder talks to Tim Hill, the Publisher of Dove Medical Press, a small OA publisher based in Auckland, New Zealand

As has been pointed out many times before, the Internet poses both a threat and an opportunity for many industries. Certainly it tends to significantly change the rules of engagement, if not rewrite them entirely. This means that companies must innovate if they want to survive.

In some ways it is the incumbents who face the greatest threat: New entrants are usually better able to exploit the opportunities of the new environment, not least because they enter the market with far fewer pre-conceived ideas, and little or no investment (financial or psychological) in the traditional way of doing things.

It is surely for this reason that Open Access ([OA](#)) publishing has been pioneered not by large traditional publishers like [Elsevier](#) and [Springer](#) (who view OA as a threat to their subscription revenues) but by start-ups like [Biomed Central](#) and [Public Library of Science](#).

However, since it is they who usually have to create the new business models, new entrants have to be prepared to take considerable risks. Incumbents, by contrast, can usually bide their time and wait to see if the new model is workable before embracing it, often by acquiring the company that developed it. As such, it is sometimes sufficient for a new entrant simply to demonstrate that a new model appears to be workable, and then "exit" the market with a substantial profit. That, it would seem, is what happened in October, when Springer [announced](#) that it was purchasing Biomed Central.

Such is the ecosystem of market capitalism. And since at the point when an established industry finds itself disrupted by new technology there is usually no shortage of opportunities, it is no surprise that we are seeing a flood of small new OA publishers entering the scholarly communication market, most of whom appear to have set themselves the ambitious task of creating a large portfolio of new journals very rapidly.

The arrival of these new publishers has been warmly received by OA advocates, most of whom view the [rapid growth](#) in the number of OA journals as evidence that a tipping point has been reached, and the OA movement has therefore finally won the argument. Today the [Directory of Open Access Journals](#) lists nearly 4,000 OA journals, and some expect to see a [50% growth](#) in 2008.

But as the excitement has grown, so have the questions. Who are these new publishers? How are they recruiting their editorial boards, and attracting article submissions? How many of their journals actually have papers in them? And how are they evaluating papers before publishing them?

Information Today columnist Robin Peek, for instance, [points out](#) that, on closer inspection, many of the new journals appear to have very little (if any) content in them, and some appear to have introduced rather unusual peer review practices.

To add to the uncertainty, the ownership of some of these companies can be a little obscure. When earlier this year I [raised the issue](#) of ownership with the editorial director of [Bentham Science Publishers](#), Matthew Honan, he would say only that the company was owned by "a number of individuals, and the legal part of the business is based in the United Arab Emirates". Asked to specify who the individuals were Honan insisted, "I can't disclose their names to you."

But the most frequently voiced concern is that these companies have been bombarding researchers with unsolicited e-mails inviting them to join editorial boards and to submit papers to journals – an approach presumably adopted because of the need to sign up thousands of scholars in a very short space of time.

[Dr Gunther Eysenbach](#), an associate professor at the [University of Toronto](#), and founder and editor-in-chief of the [Journal of Medical Internet Research](#), has been especially critical of these email campaigns, and [penned](#) several angry posts on his [blog](#) accusing the perpetrators of spamming researchers, a practice, he argued, that is not only offensive but – where the publisher has no prior business relationship with the recipient – also illegal.

At one point Eysenbach became so angry that he [threatened to sue](#) Bentham. He has also co-founded a new organisation called the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association ([OASPA](#)) partly in order to try and curb this kind of activity. Launched last month, a key objective of OASPA, Eysenbach [explained](#) recently on his blog, is "to set standards and [keep] the standard of OA publishing high (e.g. by creating and enforcing a code of conduct, which includes for example standards against spamming)."

But is it possible that some of the criticisms being levelled at these companies could be off-target, or inaccurate, and that the reputation of well-intentioned companies could therefore be unfairly tarnished?

One of the companies Eysenbach [accused](#) of spamming is [Dove Medical Press](#), which operates out of Auckland, New Zealand. Eysenbach also implied that the publisher of Dove, [Tim Hill](#), uses the alias Tom Hill to run a second publisher [Libertas Academica](#) – both of which companies, said Eysenbach, publish "vanity journals which come in the disguise of serious open access journals."

Intrigued by these claims, I contacted Tim Hill, and invited him to do an email interview with me. Hill agreed readily, and answered my questions promptly. And, for the most part, he answered them directly. In the process, he explained that the only connection between Dove and Libertas Academica is that his son Thomas owns and operates the latter company. There is, he said, no business relationship between the two companies.

When asked about his background, Hill said that he has 35 years experience in scholarly publishing, including 19 years as managing director of the New Zealand division of the well-regarded publishing company ALDIS International (acquired by [Wolters Kluwer](#) in 1997).

Hill added that while Dove was originally conceived as a traditional subscription-based publisher, the company is currently in the throes of being transformed into an OA publisher. And from Hill's description it would appear that Dove operates a perfectly respectable peer-review system. Indeed, speaking to me Hill emphasised high editorial standards, and said: "I believe that there is a real need for the traditional editorial standards to be applied to the growing number of Open Access publishers."

What about Eysenbach's claim that Dove has been spamming researchers? Hill denied that the company has done anything improper, saying he had been advised that Dove's emailing activities were not in breach of New Zealand's anti-spam laws. In any case, he added, the email campaigns have now been discontinued, since Dove no longer needs to recruit researchers in this way.

Hill does, however, have some interesting views on spamming. He argues, for instance, that my emailing him to ask for an interview was comparable to Dove using bulk email software to invite hundreds of researchers to submit papers.

What do we learn from all this?

While it does appear that there are a number of unscrupulous OA publishers operating, I could find no reason to conclude that Dove is one of them. True, like a number of others it has been over enthusiastic in its efforts to recruit researchers to its journals and – whatever the legalities – in the process appears to have given insufficient thought to how its *modus operandi* might be perceived by the scholarly community. But this may be no more than evidence that OA publishing is experiencing the kind of teething problems that frequently occur when new business models are developed. The important point is that Hill insists Dove has ceased its bulk emailing researchers.

Perhaps the other point to make is that OA publishers might be better regarded by the research community if they were more transparent, both about their business practices and their ownership. After all, it is primarily public money that researchers will be using to pay to have their scholarly papers published in OA journals. Is it not reasonable therefore for taxpayers to expect to know exactly what is being provided for that money, and who will benefit from any profits that are made as a result?

But underlying any discussion about the activities of these new companies lies a much more essential question: Has OA publishing yet found a sustainable business model? And if it hasn't, can it? Here the jury is still out.

The interview with Tim Hill follows below.



Tim Hill
Publisher, Dove Medical Press

The interview begins...

RP: Can you begin by telling me about your background?

TH: I have been in Scientific, Technical and Medical Publishing for the past 35 years or so. I started work for a medical publisher in Bristol in the UK. John Wright and Sons were a long-established family firm that gave me a very good grounding in all aspects of the business. Latterly I came to live in New Zealand and began my 19 years with [ADIS International](#) where I ended as the Managing Director responsible for the New Zealand operations and its approximately 235 staff.

RP: As I understand it, ADIS International specialises in medical and scientific reference information for the medical profession, including drug directories and online medical information.

TH: I am not aware, in any detail, of what ADIS currently publishes. When I was with the company it published a wide variety of material, from journals through to the reference information that you mention.

RP: You left when ADIS was acquired by [Wolters Kluwer](#) did you?

TH: From memory, ADIS was acquired in 1997, and I left in December 1999.

RP: Where is Dove headquartered, who owns it, and how many employees does it have?

TH: The company headquarters are in the UK. We have offices in the UK and here in Auckland. Dove is owned by six private individuals and we have some 20 employees.

RP: What is your position in the company, and who are the other senior managers?

TH: I am the publisher.

RP: Can you say who the other owners are?

TH: No.

RP: Do you personally have a stake in the company?

TH: Yes.

RP: I see the contact person for another New Zealand-based OA publisher — [Libertas Academica](#) — is also a Mr T Hill. Is there a connection?

TH: There is no connection other than a familial one. My son, [Thomas](#), owns and operates Libertas Academica.

RP: Can you say something about the history of Dove Medical Press?

TH: Dove was created by a group of former publishing executives, mostly from ADIS International. We all had a strong affinity for scientific, technical and medical journals and we wanted to build a business dedicated to the highest editorial standards.

RP: When did Dove start operating?

TH: In 2004.

Abandoning the subscription business

RP: Dove began as a traditional subscription-based publisher did it?

TH: When we launched Dove we thought that we could build our business on the sale of subscriptions to our journals. However the world has moved on and we have moved with it, and we now realise that in order to thrive and better meet the needs of our clients we have to embrace Open Access. As a result in 2009 we will move to abandon our subscription business completely.

RP: How many journals does Dove publish?

TH: We currently have some 60 journals. We are in the process of combining our two websites: www.DoveOA.com and www.dovepress.com into a single site. You can obtain a complete list of the titles from these websites.

RP: I could find only 51 journals and many of them appear still to have no content. How many journals could be said to be "up and running" (with content)?

TH: There are some 60 journals with content that is currently progressing through our manuscript management system.

RP: How many papers have you published so far?

TH: To date we have published 2,200 papers.

RP: Do you have any other products — e.g. books?

TH: We don't have any other products.

RP: I note that you still have a subscription option: how does that work, and how much do you charge for subscriptions?

TH: The current subscription rates are available on the website, but this is rapidly coming to an end. As I mentioned, the subscription model will disappear shortly.

RP: I see that some of the papers are also charged for on a download basis (e.g. for \$59)?

TH: The Pay-per-View papers are ones that we published as a conventional publisher. These will not be added to from 2009 onwards.

RP: In addition, I see that you charge an additional fee for colour pages?

TH: We used to charge for colour illustrations in the non-OA journals under www.dovepress.com. However with all our titles moving to OA shortly we won't be charging anything for colour figures.

RP: You say that you are abandoning the subscription business. Your web site appears to imply that your journals are all OA already.

TH: All of our journals will be OA from 2009 onwards, and at that point all our papers will be available at no charge via the Internet.

RP: As I understand it, you charge author fees that range from \$1,126 to 1,344 per paper. Do you expect to earn revenue from any other sources with your OA journals?

TH: All journal revenues arise from the publication processing fees.

RP: I see you offer fee waivers for your OA journals. Can you give me some idea of the percentage of papers you have published with a waiver to date?

TH: This varies but probably averages around 18%.

RP: Do you think it might be fair to say that the web presence of Dove is a little confusing and perhaps somewhat misleading at the moment? Aside from there being two websites, I'm thinking, for instance, that there is not much information explaining that you are in the process of migrating from a subscription-based model to an OA model? Both web sites talk about OA, but they also invite people to subscribe to and pay for individual articles. They also refer to page charges. Is there a danger that this might put off potential customers?

TH: We are releasing a consolidated website within the next few days under the dovepress.com URL. That will contain much more information on the transition from a subscription model to the OA one. The references to subscription prices and colour figure charges (we do not charge page charges *per se*) will also be removed very soon.

RP: Does Dove offer any form of [institutional membership scheme](#) such as the one operated by Biomed Central?

TH: Yes we do offer this, and are negotiating with a number of institutions.

RP: Can you say more about how that will work, and what the charging structure is likely to be?

TH: We are still working with some institutions on this and feeling our way. As soon as we have reached some conclusions on exactly how these arrangements might work we will make these available on the website.

RP: Are there regular publication dates for the journals? Are they say, published once a month with a regular publication date?

TH: Currently our dovepress.com journals publish at 4 issues per year (Mar, Jun, Sep, and Dec) and 6 issues per year (Feb, Apr, Jun, Aug, Oct, and Dec) for the older titles. However these will move to continuous publication in 2009. As each paper is author approved (the final stage of production) it will be published onto the website.

RP: What professional online services are Dove's journals indexed in?

TH: There are quite a few: [PubMed Central](#), [MEDLINE](#), [PsycINFO](#), [ACS](#), etc.

RP: As I understand it, only four of your journals are available on Medline, and none have yet earned an impact factor. This, presumably, is a problem all new journals/publishers face? Do you think there ought to be better ways of judging the quality of new journals?

TH: [The International Journal of Nanomedicine](#) has an Impact Factor [0.618]. My personal view is that the "Journal" part of the Journal Impact Factor is going to become increasingly irrelevant as time progresses. The individual paper will become more and more what is measured to judge impact.

RP: I do not see any DOIs in the papers published on the Dove web site. Is that something you plan to add?

TH: Yes we do, and as members of [CrossRef](#) we see the DOI as very much a part of what we want to offer in the near future.

Peer review and licensing

RP: Peer review practices vary a great deal amongst scholarly publishers today: can explain the exact process that papers go through before they are published by Dove, and who is involved in the peer review process. Likewise, who makes the various decisions (including the final decision on whether to publish a paper)? Does every journal have an editor-in-chief to make the final decision for instance?

TH: We ask our authors to provide suggested peer reviewers, but these are only occasionally used by us. We have a pool of reviewers drawn from academic institutions around the globe that we have used in the past. Using our web-based system, peer reviewers can review the submitted papers and make their comments. These in turn are viewed by the independent Editor-in-Chief (Yes, each journal has its own dedicated Editor-in-Chief).

The Editor-in-Chief reviews the peer-reviewer comments and the submitted paper and then communicates directly with the author. In almost all cases some form of modification to the submitted manuscript will be requested by the Editor-in-Chief. The author will receive the Editor-in-

Chief's comments along with the anonymous peer-reviewer comments — the authors can also see these on-line if they wish.

Authors who submit a revised manuscript are also asked to provide a covering letter detailing how they have addressed the various peer-reviewer and/or Editor-in-Chief comments. The revised manuscript and covering letter goes to the Editor-in-Chief to decide whether the changes and covering letter are a sufficient response. In some cases an author will be asked to undertake further modifications and detailing of their responses.

The Editor-in-Chief and/or their Associate Editors make the decision as to what is published and what is rejected.

RP: Is the peer review at Dove all done in the traditional manner, or do you have any "community peer review" or "open peer review" processes, which seem to be becoming increasingly popular with OA publishers?

TH: We adhere to the traditional manner of conducting peer review.

RP: Is there anywhere on the Web site that explains the peer-review process? If not, are there plans to include it?

TH: We have some author documentation on our website that relates to the manuscript management system and stages that papers progress through. However I take your comments to heart and will ensure that we provide more details of peer review processes on the re-launched combined website.

RP: As discussed, Dove utilises an Author-Pays business model for its OA journals. Traditional subscription publishers like Elsevier have argued that the author-pays approach inevitably raises a conflict of interest for OA publishers, and so could lead to a decline in the quality of published papers. (This, for instance, was an argument made by Elsevier in a [Memorandum](#) to UK politicians in 2004). What is your response to that claim, and what specifically does Dove do in order to avoid any potential conflict?

TH: I think that this argument is understandable given that the traditional journal publishers have made a very good living from the old controlled-access business model. However the reality is that this argument is largely without foundation. At Dove we are very clear with all our Editors-in-Chief that their responsibility is the editorial and scientific quality of the content. Mine as publisher is the commercial management of each journal.

We have implemented this separation via our web-based editorial system. Our Editors-in-Chief or their Associate Editors log in when a paper is ready for editorial review. They see all peer reviewer comments together with the original submitted manuscripts. Our Editors-in-Chief make their decisions and press the button which communicates those decisions directly to the author(s) and Dove staff.

RP: I'm a little confused about the licensing arrangements. I believe the Dove web site states that authors retain the copyright in their works, but it also states that authors are free to self-archive. If authors do retain copyright, why would they need permission to self-archive?

TH: In the past we have retained copyright in some papers. However in our Open Access papers, which will be everything that we publish in 2009, the authors retain full rights in the paper.

RP: *Likewise, the web site seems to imply that Dove expects to acquire an exclusive licence for commercial usage. I suspect I may be misunderstanding this; perhaps you could clarify the situation?*

TH: We only require that we are granted a commercial re-use license.

RP: *I believe that OA publishers like PLoS and Biomed Central all now tend to utilise a Creative Commons licence — specifically, the [creative commons attribution license version 2.5](#)). Might it not be simpler for Dove to do the same thing? Most people now know what the various Creative Commons licences are, how they work, and therefore how they should be interpreted?*

TH: Yes it would be simpler to move to the so-called 2.5 license, and this is what we will do in 2009.

RP: *Are you saying that you plan to use a [CC-BY-NC](#) licence? I believe OA publishers like Biomed Central and PLoS generally use the [CC-BY](#).*

TH: We anticipate using both CC-BY-NC and CC-BY licenses. We will use the NC version for selected papers where we wish to retain a commercial option to reuse.

Recruiting authors and editors

RP: *Can you tell me how Dove recruits a) journal editors and b) article submissions?*

TH: When we are deciding to launch a new journal we put together a research package which seeks to identify competitor journals, the size of the published literature, the leading lights in the particular area of science or medicine etc.

If we then decide to proceed and launch a journal we utilise the leading lights identified in the research package and invite them to join with us as Editorial Board members. Suitable candidates are invited to apply for the role of Editor-in-Chief.

RP: *As you will know, the way in which some OA publishers have been recruiting editors and authors has been controversial, with claims that they have been spamming researchers. [Dr Gunther Eysenbach](#) has been particularly vocal on this, and indeed he has [accused](#) Dove of spamming researchers? I think he [inferred](#) that you were bulk emailing people using the [DMC software](#) that you have provided an endorsement for? Are his criticisms justified, or are they based on a misunderstanding?*

TH: I think that there was some confusion regarding editors and authors.

The endorsement that I provided for the DMC software was done in 2005 or 2006. The DMC software is no longer in use at Dove. We do not send out bulk emails and we follow a permission marketing approach to all our business practices.

RP: *Can you expand on this?*

TH: When we started the business we used to send out general calls for papers using the DMC software and I think it is that which Dr Eysenbach was referring to. We no longer use such general calls for papers and so we do not need to do this in the future. Our journals are now at the stage where we no longer need to issue general calls for papers. Obtaining manuscripts from authors is now via returning authors and new authors visiting our website and volunteering their papers.

We have never had any adverse comments when recruiting Editors-in-Chief or editorial board members.

RP: *Do you nevertheless accept Eysenbach's claim (if I understand his point correctly) that if a publisher emails researchers with whom it has had no prior business relationship then it is infringing the anti-spamming laws of some countries, including those of the UK and New Zealand; or do you think that his interpretation of the law may be inaccurate, or overstated?*

TH: I am not a lawyer and so can't really express a view on this. Our advice when the New Zealand law changed earlier this year was that we were not in breach. I should point out that while the law in New Zealand came into force in late 2007 there was a grace period which meant that it was not enforced until early 2008.

If we were in breach then I am afraid that you are also in breach as I never gave you any permission to contact me.

RP: *There is a difference surely between a single one-to-one email asking someone for an interview and a bulk one-to-many email campaign in which thousands of duplicate messages are sent inviting researchers to submit papers?*

TH: As I say, I am not a lawyer but my understanding is that New Zealand law does not make such fine distinctions. The phrase "Note: A single message may be spam. The message does not need to be sent or received in bulk" can be [found](#) on the New Zealand government site.

RP: *There is also an important distinction between commercial and non-commercial communication. I do not think that my message to you could be considered commercial. Inviting researchers to publish an article for a payment surely is?*

TH: To me it seems that a commercial benefit accrues in both circumstances.

RP: *You said you took legal advice; what advice did you get?*

TH: Under the advice that I received I took it that we were operating within the deemed consent provisions.

The future

RP: *Ok, let's look to the future then. Do you think that eventually all peer-reviewed papers will be published on an OA basis?*

TH: I believe that the vast majority of journals will have little choice but to move to OA as their authors and readers begin to demand it. Every day we hear from our authors and their level of commitment to OA is very strong.

RP: What are the implications of that for publishers?

TH: We think that an important traditional publishing function has been to add value to author manuscripts by implementing style conventions, conducting peer-review, editing and presenting the finished paper in an accurate and easy to read format. In the new era of OA this is even more essential.

RP: What opportunities does OA offer for small publishers? Does it perhaps level the playing field, and so make it easier for them to compete with large publishers?

TH: I think that there are opportunities for small publishers but only if they start from the premise of "how do I have to build my business in order to prosper in the OA world?" The old very high-margin business that the conventional controlled-access publishers enjoyed can't last, and they will struggle to adapt to the new reality of OA in their business.

RP: Recently the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association ([OASPA](#)) was launched. Does the OA publishing industry need to undertake self-regulation and, if so, do you think that OASPA is the right approach?

TH: Over time the role of OASPA and any other OA organisations will be clarified and publishers can make their own decisions.

RP: Do you anticipate that Dove will join OASPA?

TH: Not in the immediate future.

RP: There are an increasing number of OA journals becoming available now. What does Dove offer researchers that your competitors do not?

TH: I think that the main thing that we offer is a very strong focus on our authors' publishing needs, combined with a total commitment to the traditional role of the scholarly publisher.

I believe that there is a real need for the traditional editorial standards to be applied to the growing number of Open Access publishers. However the users of OA journals (authors, readers etc, etc) will ultimately have their say.

I believe that there is huge scope for OA publishers to revolutionise the dissemination of scholarly information. The days when authors had to give copyright in their work, often when research has been paid for by tax payers, to a commercial publisher who then sold it to a small number of institutions for a large amount of money, are hopefully coming to an end.

RP: Thank you for your time.

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