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Research in Focus: Introducing the Access to Research scheme

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Although there is now a rapid shift towards academic research articles becoming available online on an 'open access' basis (which means that they are freely accessible to anyone with an internet connection), there are still a significant number that are not free to access online. For students and academics, this is very rarely a problem, as their access to a wide range of academic journals is guaranteed through their institution's library subscription arrangements. NHS employees are also often able to access scholarly journals through their organisation's libraries.

But this poses an obvious gap in provision for anyone without recourse to such institutional access. Whether members of the public, independent researchers, small charities, patient advocates or prospective students wanting to develop a research proposal, the cost charged via academic journal publishers for an individual article can be significant (and has to be paid upfront, whether or not the article turns out to be useful). In the past, some people have found creative work-arounds to this problem (e.g. accessing a university library through enrolling for the cheapest course available, or taking a part-time job in a university to secure library access). But more generally, citizen access to research has been limited. Which is rather bizarre when one considers that the vast majority of the research reported in these academic journals is funded by taxpayers around the world, via taxpayer-funded research councils or universities.

In the UK, the Access to Research scheme has been designed to address this issue. Originally offered as a two-year pilot, this scheme continues to offer members of the public free access to a wide range of academic journal articles via their local public library, based on a growing set of agreements between academic publishers and public library services.

Using the scheme is very straightforward. There is no need to register. At home, you simply search for the Access to Research website (www.accesstoresearch.org.uk), agree to their terms and conditions and then search the database to locate articles that you are interested in reading. If an article is open access, you can read it immediately. If it is not, you can in any case read the abstract (or brief summary). Confident that the articles you want to read are available, the next step is then to pop into your local library to access the full article on a library pc. All UK local authorities are able to opt their libraries into

the scheme for free, so if yours doesn't provide this service, just let them know that you want it!

I have accessed a number of key maternity-related articles via this scheme, and I really recommend it. Its usefulness will doubtless decline over time, as more and more journal articles become free to access, and thus available direct from the publisher's website. But even if you are seeking to access articles that are already freely available, the one-stop shop nature of this portal is convenient and effective, and I find the university-quality search engine really useful. Why not give it a try? I can guarantee that you'll find something interesting to read once you start searching: my latest find was a fascinating article dating back to 2003 discussing the potential benefits of continuity of care across the whole healthcare system, just the night before the same team hit the national headlines with their most recent work!