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Occasional Thoughts From the Road — Why I Do What I Do

by Bob Schatz (North American Sales Manager, BioMed Central; Phone: 646-258-2126) <robert.schatz@biomedcentral.com>

H is name is Musa, and he works in an institute in Nigeria for the study and treatment of trypanosomiasis, or sleeping sickness. Dressed in a long, bright blue caftan and taqiyah, he made his way past the BioMed Central booth at ACRL. Given our name and some of the signage we displayed, he stopped to talk about what kinds of journals we publish and to tell me about his institute.

We talked at some length about our various journals and the numerous articles we publish about parasitic diseases, including trypanosomiasis. On a whim, I typed “tsetse,” the name of the fly that carries the sleeping sickness parasite, as a keyword search of the BioMed Central database and came up with nearly two hundred hits. He was impressed. I then told him that all these articles were available to him and his fellow researchers without subscriptions, since BioMed Central is an open-access publisher.

Musa’s English is excellent, but it is not his native tongue, and my statement stopped him. He heard me correctly, but his brain was not ready to accept that he had.

“Excuse me,” he said, “but we would need to subscribe to your journals to reach these articles. Is this not right?” I told him no, that we make our peer-reviewed research available without subscriptions. “But we would need a special password to have access, would we not?” Again, I explained the open-access model and our desire that institutes of his kind have access to the corpus of our work without restrictions.

“Is this possible?” he asked. I assured him it was. It took a few more seconds, but his face then lit up into a broad smile. “Mr. Bob,” he said (my first name was prominently displayed on my badge), “this is the most wonderful thing I have heard since I got here. This could save lives where I come from.” I told him that was exactly our intent. To say he was elated is an understatement. He kept shaking my hand and patting me on the back. “This is a wonderful thing. This is wonderful.”

By the time we finished our talk, he had taken my photo and received stuffed Gulliver toys for his two small children. (Gulliver is a turtle-like mascot of BioMed Central.) He must have shaken my hand twenty times more. We parted good friends.

Later that evening, not long after I had related my encounter with Musa to a co-worker, I saw him in the lobby of the Marriott. I went over to say hello. He was talking on his cell phone to his brother who resides in Washington, DC. Before I knew it, Musa handed me the phone and said his brother wanted to talk to me. The brother told me how grateful he was for the work that BioMed Central was doing and how much it would mean to Musa’s institute. He said Musa could talk of nothing else during their phone call. I think he called me Mr. Bob too. I’m not sure, because I was so unprepared for that conversation to take place.

I won’t tell BioMed Central and Springer that the wage they pay me isn’t important, but ultimately encounters like this one with Musa and his brother are why I do what I do. Occasionally my work takes on a very human face, this time of a gentle, grateful Muslim man who is working for the betterment of his people: my brother and friend, Musa.

I love my job.