

# Joining Together for a Win-Win

By Jeffrey S Reznick and Simon Chaplin

**Through public-private partnerships, government agencies and outside organizations can serve citizens together.**

December 9, 2016



Public-private partnerships abound at all levels of government—federal, state, and local. They touch virtually every aspect of our society, from the environment to space travel, transportation to housing, security to health and human services, and many more. Much like [interagency collaborations](#), the best public-private partnerships are: conceived thoughtfully and in accordance with established rules and regulations developed carefully and in mutually supportive ways pursued to yield outcomes that help each partner achieve its missions and, ultimately, serve the public more effectively.

## The Opportunity

The [National Council for Public-Private Partnerships](#) defines a public-private partnership as "a contractual arrangement between a public agency (federal, state, or local) and a private sector entity. Through this agreement, the skills and assets of each sector (public and private) are shared in delivering a service or facility for the use of the general public. In addition to sharing resources, each party shares in the risks and rewards potential in the delivery of the service and/or facility."

The council offers [seven keys to success](#) in the development of public-private partnerships. With a shared mission to advance public access to biomedical literature, the National Library of Medicine (NLM) and the Wellcome Trust have been using these keys to unlock a successful public-private partnership.

The [Wellcome Trust](#) exists to improve health for everyone by helping great ideas to thrive. It is a global charitable foundation, both politically and financially independent. The trust supports scientists and researchers, takes on big problems, fuels imaginations, and sparks debate. It has been a long-standing advocate of open access to research outputs and a supporter of projects to increase access to historical biomedical literature through digitization.

The [NLM](#) is the world's largest biomedical library and one of the 27 institutes and centers that constitute the National Institutes of Health of the Department of Health and Human Services. The library is a leader in the application of computer and communications technology to the advancement of health and improvement of the human condition. The NLM has long supported

the design and implementation of the [National Institutes of Health's public access policy](#), to the end of advancing science and improving human health.

A major bond between these organizations is their support of public access to current and historical biomedical literature, but there are, of course, many different bonds that can bring together public and private sector organizations. In the context of the military and veterans' health, for example, the U.S. Department of Defense has partnered with the Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund to create the [National Intrepid Center of Excellence for Service Members with Traumatic Brain Injury](#).

With regard to space travel, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration has [partnered with the commercial space sector](#) to advance the agency's goals for robotic and human exploration of the solar system. And within the Federal Highway Administration in the Department of Transportation, there is the [Center for Innovative Finance Support](#) to encourage public-private partnerships for improving bridges, railways, roads, and tunnels.

For the NLM and the Wellcome Trust, a common interest in public access to biomedical literature provides the main framework for actively working together. Equally important has been a common attention to the keys to success outlined by the National Council for Public-Private Partnerships. For example, the organizations:

- are ideally suited to be partners, due to their respective national and international reputations, with each bringing to the table major stakeholders—researchers, educators, and students—who will benefit directly from a partnership
- involve experts in information technology, librarianship, and history who serve together as public sector champions for making more contemporary and historical biomedical literature freely available to the public operate in complementary statutory environments in which the Wellcome Trust can choose to support likeminded organizations and the [NLM is authorized](#) by Congress to accept such donations in support of its mission.
- abide by a detailed contract and business plan, in the form of a memorandum of understanding, which describes the background and goals of the project, as well as the roles, responsibilities, and resources of all parties.

Beyond following these keys to success, among others, NLM and the Wellcome Trust have applied certain universal approaches to grow and succeed in their partnership. As in the case of interagency collaborations, these approaches included a strong rapport, mutual respect and support, and clear and consistent communication. While top-level support was a linchpin to success, a strong rapport has been—and remains—a key factor in the partnership's success.

## The Solution

Over the past dozen years, the Wellcome Trust and the NLM have partnered to expand public access to historical journal literature in one of the world's largest free and full-text digital

archives, the National Institutes of Health life sciences repository known as [PubMed Central](#) (PMC). This collaboration has enabled a generation of researchers today, and generations to follow, to have ready access to a deep and detailed record of human experience in medicine.

The partnership between the Wellcome Trust and the NLM [traces its roots to 2004](#), when both organizations worked with the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and a number of medical journal publishers to agree through a memorandum of understanding that the historical issues of medical journals contain valuable information for research, education, and learning, and therefore should be digitized and freely available to all who would wish to consult them. This collective agreement, and the gift of £1.25 million that the Wellcome and JISC voluntarily offered to the NLM, represented the parties' commitment to public access to historical biomedical information.

Ultimately, this partnership yielded the availability of more than 1 million articles in PMC, scanned from 160 journal titles and spanning nearly two centuries. It also yielded an important lesson: Once the seed of a good idea is sown and nurtured, it bears fruit for many years, including the opportunity to work together again. The partnership continues to [expand public access](#) to historical biomedical literature in PMC as a means of informing research, education, and learning that can benefit the advancement of human health and well-being.

## The Results

The Wellcome/NLM partnership has achieved measurable results: More than 1 million historical medical journal articles are already freely available through PMC. Hundreds of thousands more will be available in the future. Researchers, educators, and learners will benefit from this growing resource for a long time.

With such access, for example, questions about past, present, and future epidemics will more likely have answers. Advances in medicine and science during wartime can be better understood, aiding the thoughtful development of new treatments, without reinventing the wheel. And the development of the medical profession, and changes in the experience of patients, can be appreciated in greater detail, to improve the delivery of healthcare for all.

Hand in hand with interagency collaborations, public-private partnerships make great sense as they testify to powerful organizational synergies and the determination of colleagues to build and sustain collaboration on multiple levels. The Wellcome/NLM partnership is an example of one such partnership that has yielded concrete outcomes, sound financial decisions, and collaboration on the part of leadership and multidisciplinary teams. The investment of time and effort was substantial, but it has yielded lasting dividends for everyone involved, especially the public.

Good things can happen, for today and tomorrow, when like-minded individuals and organizations sit down to share ideas and find common ground to work together—whether it

be in the area of research, education, or learning that can benefit from access to historical medical journals; public safety in our transportation

system; or improving the environment. While the Wellcome/NLM collaboration is unique in many ways, the approaches taken to build it, and the federal regulations followed to develop it, and the values it embodies can operate in other contexts to serve the public.

Learn more about public-private partnerships from these resources:

[A Guide to Innovative Public-Private Partnerships: Utilizing the Resources of the Private Sector for the Public Good](#), book by Thomas A. Cellucci

[Private Capital, Public Good: Drivers of Successful Infrastructure Public-Private Partnerships](#), a report from the Brookings Institution

[Expanding Public-Private Collaboration on Infrastructure Development and Financing](#), a July 2014 presidential memorandum

[President Obama Promotes Exploration of Mars Through Private-Public Partnership](#), a 2016 Digital Trends article.

Listen to [The Public Manager podcast](#) for an interview with Jeffrey Reznick.

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**Note: The Intramural Research Program of the National Institutes of Health, National Library of Medicine, provided support in the writing of this article.**