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Editorial

Keeping the Wheels of the Scientific Endeavor Turning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

I'm writing in a hastily constructed home office. My mind is preoccupied by a world that has become increasingly unrecognizable in the past months. It's likely that we share these circumstances.

I imagine we share more than that.

When I walked away from the lab for the last time, I experienced an existential pain that was nearly physical. I described it to my loved ones, metaphorically, as a phantom limb. I imagine that many of you, forced away from the bench by the COVID-19 pandemic, are experiencing something similar, even though we all trust that you're not walking away from the lab for the last time. But I imagine that your pain is made worse by the shock of it, a sense of powerlessness, and anxious uncertainty about how long the current circumstances will last. How does the scientific endeavor go on during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Having asked that question of nearly everyone I've talked to in the past few weeks, my sense is that a person's answer is dominated by their sense of how long it will take to get back to normal. I think that our lives will be shaped by the pandemic for quite some time, and that our collective experience threatens to be protracted and devastating. I don't think that experimental research has simply been put "on ice" for a couple of months. I think that research productivity will suffer considerably for many months, if not longer, and continue to suffer after shelter-in-place orders are lifted. I think this will hit particularly hard for post-docs, untenured faculty, and those doing long-term, large-scale, and animal experiments.

These are simply the opinions of an informed citizen; I'm no expert. Perhaps I'm overly pessimistic, but in this uncertain time, I would rather prepare for a challenge and be proven wrong than hope for the best be caught flat-footed.

Accordingly, *Cell Systems* is responding to the world around us and changing our editorial practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are committed to keeping the wheels of the scientific endeavor turning. Experimental labs may lie quiet, but that doesn't mean that the thinking, analysis, and writing that are critical to discovery and understanding can't go on. Even more importantly, we are committed to supporting public health measures designed to keep people home unless their work is vital to society or immediately important to coordinated efforts to fight COVID-19.

If you are doing COVID-19-focused work, thank you for your effort in the face of this challenge. We will expedite peer review and work to have incisive, expert comments to you within days.

For all the manuscripts we see, *Cell Systems* will continue our practice of reviewing what we have in front of us, not a hypothetical ideal that those manuscripts may someday reach, as I've described before (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cels.2019.07.002>). However, we will change our editorial process after the first round of peer review as follows:

- If reviews are favorable, we won't require that authors conduct new wet lab experiments as a condition of accept-

ing manuscripts for publication. Instead, we'll reiterate our commitment to respecting public health directives and talk to you about how, given the constraints imposed by social distancing, local orders, and lab closures, we can move forward with your manuscript.

- Revision plans will consist of some mix of new computational work, new analysis of existing data, text revisions, and if necessary, change of article formats. (For example, if you'd need new wet lab experiments to publish as a seven-figure Article, we may instead suggest that you publish your existing work as a four-figure Report.)
- The timing of revisions will be exceptionally flexible. Also, recall that *Cell Systems* believes that "scooping" hurts individual scientists and science at large ([https://www.cell.com/cell-systems/fulltext/S2405-4712\(18\)30441-1](https://www.cell.com/cell-systems/fulltext/S2405-4712(18)30441-1)).
- If we can't offer a revision but are confident in your manuscript's scientific rigor, we will work with our Cell Press colleagues to offer you a journal home for your manuscript that won't require new wet lab work.

Critically, this temporary change in practice still follows logically from what *Cell Systems* has always done. We have always aimed for concrete, scientifically necessary revisions, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, our decisions and practice will adhere to the scientific value structure we've built over the years and explained in past Editorials. If you're an author, you can expect an experience that is consistent with what you've known in the past. If you're a reader, the character of *Cell Systems* papers won't change—they will still be creative, rigorous, and robust—but you may notice that very cool experiments are missing, claims are toned down, and studies are more tightly circumscribed than they have been.

Our editorial approach during the COVID-19 pandemic is a departure from standard practice in publishing. It may have downstream consequences, like lowering our Impact Factor. That's fine. We believe that it's the right thing for *Cell Systems* to do under these extreme circumstances. Journals cannot incentivize new wet lab work if it undermines public health efforts and could even put scientists at risk. We also think that the effects of pandemic will be too long-term to ask our authors to put their publications on hold while we watch and wait.

A key lesson from the pandemic is that acting early, before it's comfortable, is important in the long run. I would rather be too early and do too much than be too late and not do enough. By acting now, my hope is that together, we can keep the wheels of the scientific endeavor turning.

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