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COVID-19: Navigating Uncertainties Together

The COVID-19 outbreak, caused by the newly described viral pathogen SARS-CoV-2, is having a devastating effect on the scientific community. China has been battling the virus for months and provides a bellwether for the impact we are starting to experience on global research. Throughout the country, experimental facilities were essentially shut down. With travel restrictions imposed to prevent further spread of the coronavirus, laboratory members were unable to leave their hometowns. While students and postdocs from some areas are now gradually returning to their research projects, personnel maximums have been put in place restricting the number of people who can work simultaneously in any one location. Those returning undergo mandatory 2-week quarantines in a contracted hotel before rejoining their laboratories. The slowdown in productivity is impacting not only the rate but also the reporting of science. Editorially, at *Cell* we have seen delays in timelines for manuscript submissions and resubmissions.

A Setback to Science Anywhere Is a Setback to Science Everywhere

As China is a major contributor to scientific output and discourse, the disruption facing the many hard-working researchers in China would in itself be a significant setback for science. This reality should have been reason enough for the rest of the world to care, offer help, and act quickly to prevent further spread. While some did, there is clearly more we could have done. A setback to science anywhere is a setback to science everywhere. Indeed, the situation for science over the past few months has been further compounded by the fact that the Chinese scientific community is collaborating with researchers around the world, and Chinese postdocs and students represent a sizable portion of laboratory members globally.

Now, as the pandemic spreads beyond China, more and more groups around the globe are struggling to keep the engines of research going, as social distancing and quarantine measures are enacted. The verbal discussion and dissemination of scientific information in person, *en masse* has come to a halt as scientific meetings worldwide have been canceled or postponed for the foreseeable future and borders have been closed. Scientists who might still be able to travel abroad likely face a 14-day quarantine when they return to their own country. Additional concerns over research supply chains are mounting, and researchers are finding commonly used items, such as gloves and facemasks, backordered or rightfully reserved for medical use. Education has been interrupted in many places, at all levels, and clinical trials are being shelved as hospitals prepare for the worst and worried (and often vulnerable) trial participants stay home.

In our view, the precautions in China and elsewhere, though arduous for researchers and institutions, are necessary measures aimed at saving as many lives as possible, young and old. In many places, they likely could have been enacted sooner to minimize viral spread and mitigate long-term impact. Even now, SARS-CoV-2 testing rates remain unacceptably low in

many countries, especially in the United States. Official responses to this crisis will determine the extent to which both society and science suffers.

Our Community, Our Crisis

At *Cell* and Cell Press, our work has also been impacted by this virus. Like most of you, all of our travel activity has halted. At any given time, we typically have editors spread throughout the world, participating in conferences and meeting with potential authors and experts in person. This is a critical part of our work, as hearing about early-stage projects, and unpublished stories, often leads to new ideas, expanded relationships within the scientific communities, and encounters with new potential reviewers. Importantly, meetings are also opportunities for us to receive feedback on how we can improve our service to the community. As we write, we have editors in quarantine and isolation, including Yang Yang, our China-based *Cell* editor. Some of our editors find themselves working from home with make-shift solutions for childcare as schools and daycares close. We are in this together with you.

But the pandemic hasn't affected our ability to publish exciting science, and we will continue to do our best to disseminate the important, trustworthy, and actionable information we receive to the scientific community as quickly as possible without compromising quality or our lowering standards. In an era of rapid self-reporting, our goal is to help establish the credibility of research reports so that vetted science can appropriately influence medical decision-makers, public policy, and public opinion. By working with expert investigators and reviewers, we are moving quickly to share information that stands athwart of the snake-oil, complacency, conspiracy theories and racism born out of misinformation, which during a pandemic, is a matter of life and death.

In this time of uncertainty, the world is looking to scientists and medical personnel to lead the way. It is imperative that, though we maintain our social distance, we come together as a community to work through the unique difficulties researchers face during this trying time. At *Cell*, we understand the challenges scientists are up against right now, and behind the scenes we are diligently working with authors to find solutions, on a case-by-case basis. This is a time for flexibility and accommodation, and our editors are here to listen and to help.

We have a full-time editorial staff that discusses and makes all major decisions on all papers, and there are a number of ways that we want to provide relief for anxious investigators. For papers in revision, we want you to know that timelines are negotiable and can be extended. If there are reviewer or editorial requests that seem unreasonable or outside of scope, we are always happy to discuss them. For our expert reviewers, we understand that you may also need some additional flexibility and time completing your assessments. Please reach out to us if your situation changes and you do not think you can complete your review by the proposed deadline.



For new submissions, formatting constraints (including article type and layout) should never be a barrier to rapid submission, nor should scope concerns regarding manuscript length or whether your paper feels like a “typical” *Cell* paper. *Cell* is always open to publishing succinct, impactful papers. Especially at this time, when new findings are coming at a rapid rate, if the main message can be effectively conveyed in a few figures, we welcome submission. Manuscripts that do not fit a traditional mechanistic view of *Cell* are also welcome, including those clinical in nature. We actively encourage you to post your COVID-19 manuscripts to a preprint server, and we can accommodate requests for an expedited review process for urgent papers. To further speed the publishing process, manuscripts may be co-submitted to both *Cell* and one other Cell Press journal for co-consideration. Though editorially independent, we maintain strong working relationships with all of our sister journals, and many authors have saved valuable time by taking advantage of co-review and our internal transfer system.

Let's Learn from This and Move Forward

As scientific knowledge and the world around us evolves, we are keen to make changes too. We view the current situation as an opportunity to learn and prepare for future disruptions and uncertainties. We are making the best of this difficult experience by thinking about ways we might develop more efficient workflows and better practices that could be re-deployed when the next urgent scientific question arises. In the short term, we are replacing face-to-face editor meetings at conferences with video calls and hosting Cell Symposia speakers virtually rather than in person. Some of these new practices could be incorporated, at

least in part, into our normal routines, especially to reduce the impact our travel has on the world's climate. We will continue to serve the community by bringing great minds together to find solutions for authors, for scientific communication, and for this pandemic. If you are facing a specific challenge, regardless of whether it is unique to your situation or more widespread, or if you have ideas for how our processes could be improved, we want to know. You can email us directly at cellms@cell.com.

It is very likely that the worst of this pandemic is yet to come. But as proponents of science, we can all make the best of this grave situation. We may not be able to stop new dangerous pathogens from emerging, but we can certainly be better informed and more prepared. As society is forced to confront the importance of the science you already do and love, we should all be advocating for more and consistent science funding and stronger science voices in government. We should all publicly support and encourage the people putting in tireless effort to study this virus, fight misinformation, care for the sick, and work toward new treatments and vaccines. We should also take advantage of disrupted routines to pause, spend time with loved ones, think, and re-think. Plenty of research shows that pressure drives auspicious evolution, and time to step back and contemplate is essential for creativity and innovation. You may consider using some of the downtime you might have to evaluate research directions, write up results, or realize ideas you may have tabled for literature reviews or other thought pieces. If you do, we'd love to hear about them as well.

We are going to get through this, and we are going to be stronger on the other end.

The *Cell* Editorial Team

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