

Description

With the attention of the whole world focused on COVID-19, other issues are taking a back seat. This is certainly true of the scientific community, where many are re-directing their efforts towards research into COVID-19. In some places, researchers with medical expertise are even helping to treat patients.

The research community is being affected by the pandemic in many different ways. Projects are being put on hold, conferences are cancelled or postponed, industries are slowing as many workers are asked to stay at home. Schools and universities are closed to all but essential staff. Many laboratories are idle. Others are now offering a vital service by carrying out COVID-19 testing, or helping to produce disinfectant products or safety gear.

In academic publishing, some journal editors are prioritizing papers on COVID-19. Meanwhile, researchers are likely to be submitting fewer papers, as they are unable to complete projects.

COVID-19 Research Takes the Lead

Research funding is also being forced to respond to COVID-19. While many grant applications have been slowed, or put on hold, some funders are offering fast-track funding for projects related to COVID-19. In the US, the National Institutes of Health have a number of funding opportunities specifically related to COVID-19. Applications are being accepted on a rolling basis, often into 2021. The NIH are also offering flexibility for other applicants and existing grant holders, by extending deadlines for example.

Also in the US, the National Science Foundation (NSF) has an established system for fast-track grant applications. Designed for time-sensitive ideas, the NSF's RAPID programme has already funded a dozen COVID-19 projects. One of these is held by Roxane Silver, of the University of Irvine, California. Silver is an expert on the health effects of traumatic life events. The NSF grant will allow her to study the long-term effects of the pandemic on individuals.

In March, the UK's Wellcome Trust joined forces with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Mastercard to set up the COVID-19 Therapeutics Accelerator. This $125 million fund is targeted at drug development. Currently, there is no proven treatment for COVID-19. The COVID-19 Therapeutics Accelerator aims to change this, by pushing forward the development of new drugs. At the same time, existing treatments will be tested to see if they are effective against COVID-19. Researchers interested

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in accessing the funding should contact the Wellcome Trust.

Governments and national research councils are also committing huge amounts of money to COVID-19 research. The government of Canada is currently funding 99 projects on COVID-19, with a total investment of $54.2 million. The government of Ireland has called for proposals for projects looking at the immediate challenges posed by coronavirus. Applications will be accepted until further notice.

On 24th March, Omidyar Network India launched a rapid-response funding scheme to tackle COVID-19. The US$1 million fund will support research covering anything from app development to community outreach schemes.

These are just a few of the research funding efforts that are being deployed in the world-wide fight against COVID-19.

How Could COVID-19 Funding Affect other Research?

Clearly, COVID-19 is an immediate and severe concern. This is why so many governments, businesses and other funders are directing funds to COVID-19 research.

But what about other scientific research? Will it be badly affected by the focus on COVID-19? In many cases, only time will tell. Many research projects have already been forced to slow or stop during the pandemic. Often, this will mean more money is needed – for staff costs, for example – once the project is able to re-start. Some researchers are understandably concerned that this money will not be available. Unfortunately, it seems that COVID-19 will certainly affect other fields of research.

Other diseases and other problems have, sadly, not disappeared with the arrival of COVID-19. Sadly, scientific progress may be slowed in other areas due to the focus on the pandemic. In some countries, governments have directly ordered non-essential research to stop, for the safety of staff. At Cambridge University, the vice-chancellor said, “Unless it is related to COVID-19…. all research undertaken on university premises will need to be paused.” In other places, only research “in the national interest” is allowed. At University College London, UK, all clinical research is on hold. Medically-trained staff have instead been sent to assist the national health service in treating COVID-19 patients.

Most clinical trials, other than those involving COVID-19, have also been forced to stop. This is for two reasons: it is not safe for patients to visit hospitals unless absolutely necessary, and medical staff are needed elsewhere, to care for COVID-19 patients. Unfortunately, this means that progress in finding treatments for other serious illnesses will be delayed. In just one example, Cancer Research UK, Europe’s largest cancer research charity, has postponed all new trials. Where possible, patients on current trials will be participate in non-contact ways, such as through telephone or video check-ups.

COVID-19 and the Climate Crisis

COVID-19 has overshadowed the other great crisis facing the world: climate change. Just as many governments were beginning to commit to fighting climate change, plans have been forced to change. This year’s United Nations global climate summit has had to be postponed due to the pandemic. The summit, which was due to take place in Glasgow, Scotland, will now take place next year. Patricia Espinosa, head of the U.N. climate office, said the new coronavirus “is the most urgent threat facing

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humanity today, but we cannot forget that climate change is the biggest threat facing humanity over the long term."

It is right that research is focused, right now, on the threat of COVID-19. However, once the worst of the pandemic is over – hopefully, when a vaccine and even a cure are found – other research must not be neglected. The scientific research community will need the support of funders if progress is to be maintained.

Has your research been affected by COVID-19? How should the need for COVID-19 research be balanced with funding other projects? Share your thoughts in the comments below.

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