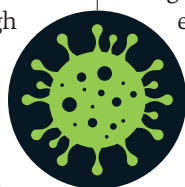


COVID-19: THE PERFECT TIME FOR A NEW JOB?



David Mathews reflects on his experiences of starting a career in biomedical science at the peak of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought surprises and difficulties for us all. Adjusting to the new rules and regulations that guide our daily routines has taken some getting used to. Dealing with all of this has thrown a spanner in the works that nobody imagined we would be contending with at all, never mind still wrestling with as we progress through the beginning months of 2021. It has for me, however, also provided a new job and with it a unique opportunity to train and grow as a scientist during the pandemic.



Integration

Starting out in a new post and integrating into a new team can be difficult for anyone, but that is exactly what I did when I began my new role as a biomedical scientist at the height of lockdown in April 2020. The added pressures of the pandemic have meant that this integration process has been different to the pre-COVID ways of doing things. For me, this was perhaps less evident than it has been for others.

I was able to secure a job in the same laboratory in which I conducted the placement year for my undergraduate degree, so there are many familiar faces and I

was able to pick up from where I left off. There are, of course, new faces there too, as well as those who joined the team after I did. Part of the difficulty with all of this has been trying to build relationships when your first conversations are through face masks and between plastic dividers.

Induction processes usually involve carrying out compulsory training, such as fire safety or information governance, in lecture-style sessions. This has been adapted to adhere to guidelines and so my compulsory training was conducted online. In terms of education in my job role, this is now something that requires a more detailed planning approach. Providing a member of staff to carry out



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the training is now something that relies completely on the proper preventative measures being in place, as well as actually having the ability to task that staff member in the first place. Trainers are often sought-after members of staff with a vast repertoire of skills and knowledge. When there are problems that need solving they are often called away to do just that. With all these necessary prerequisites needing to be met, the time taken to plan and carry out training is greatly increased during a period when there isn't much free time to give. I have only positive experiences of training thus far – those around me have been keen to pass on their knowledge and I have learnt that training need not always be formal. Simply asking questions or probing a colleague for a greater depth of knowledge in an area of interest has led to some of the best teaching I have had.

It would be remiss of me to fail to mention at this stage the trainees in the laboratory with me. Bouncing ideas off one another, whether it be concerned with evidence for our specialist portfolios or trying to get to grips with some of the complicated scientific processes, has allowed a collaborative and cohesive work ethic to come to the fore. It has been a great experience to share my own ideas, to hear those of others and work towards a solution together.

The workload

During recent months I have seen a change in the workload coming through the laboratory. Sample numbers aren't stable and it's possible to have days where there are reduced workloads, and days where it's all-hands-on-deck to try and work through the samples coming into



the laboratory. It has been important to stay alert and prepared for an influx of samples at any time of the day or night and with each day being so unpredictable, it has been difficult to plan out the day ahead. Time management skills are as critical now as they ever have been, and they are being tested each day.

It is encouraging for an early career scientist, such as myself, to witness such a degree of collaboration throughout the pandemic. I do not just mean interdepartmentally; I mean cross institutionally. Hospital laboratories, academic, and industry laboratories have all been extremely busy conducting research to try and understand the effects of COVID-19 and to develop more sensitive and more specific assays for its detection. This has opened opportunities

for biomedical scientists to get involved in research within their own disciplines, or branching out to others, which I would hope to see continuing long after the end of the pandemic.

Where I'm based, in Northern Ireland, there is a strong sense of community among biomedical scientists. Ongoing partnerships among biomedical scientists in other hospitals are something I see as extremely valuable. Advice and guidance from those who may use a particular set of reagents, or have found a similar problem before, can go a long way towards solving the issue. To see this strong rapport extending well beyond the walls of my own laboratory is encouraging and it is something I am keen to continue developing. There are friends I attended university with in various pathology laboratories and I remain in contact with many of them. Carrying that through will undoubtedly pay dividends as I encounter new problems along my career path. It is a testament to the robust nature of an integrated pathology network.

Pressures and problems

The pandemic has truly been an insight into the adaptive nature of biomedical sciences and how easily things can change as scientific endeavour leads us to new information. Along with novel COVID-19 cases has come a new set of laboratory findings associated with the clinical condition of patients. Research is being published daily to try and clarify the mechanisms of these issues, such as the onset of lymphopenia or the raised D-dimer concentrations. It can be a lot to keep on top of, especially whilst trying to learn the basics of the discipline at the same time. My colleagues have worked extremely diligently throughout this period to ensure that trainees, such as myself, have been receiving adequate training,



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meanwhile trying to get to grips with all these new findings themselves. A task I do not envy, but one I am thankful for.

Something I consider to be one of the most important aspects of a career is work-life balance. Pressures and problems at home are something that can always occupy space in our minds, and it is all too easy to forget about other people's problems when they aren't something we are going through ourselves. With the added worry of COVID, it can sometimes be difficult to focus on the work at hand. But this pandemic is a shared experience, which means we can all pull together to work with, and work for, each other. I have been witness to some terrific teamwork, which has shown me how important it is that we communicate and work together.

Scientific professions seem to have a unique way of making you feel very lost at times. With such a vast

knowledge spread across reams of journals, textbooks, and articles, it is not uncommon to feel some imposter syndrome slipping in. It is something I have certainly felt from time to time. Spending the working day surrounded by

people who are fantastic at their jobs and extremely knowledgeable can make it difficult to feel like your place is among them. But you really do learn something new every day. What I know now is that with time, effort, and a supportive group of colleagues and mentors, seemingly impossible challenges can be made to be manageable tasks. Even where I am today is a far cry from where I was on day one, and I still have a great deal of learning to do.

Throughout the course of recent events, I have been shown that there are many ways to achieve an end goal. Although we are all still ultimately carrying out the same job and providing the same service, we are doing it differently. The details of how we get there can be altered and improved, as long as the objective is achieved. For me, there is little more valuable than being able to learn a lesson from all of life's challenges. This pandemic has been a major challenge, but I think that the lessons I have learnt, and continue to learn, will stay with me throughout my career. 

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