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COVID-19 shutdowns have had detrimental impacts on new labs, but thoughtful support from institutions and funding bodies may alleviate key pressures and stresses compounded by forced decreases in productivity. Here, *Cell Stem Cell* chats with two investigators from our “Introductions to the community: Early-career researchers in the time of COVID-19” Voices series about support they’ve received from their institutions and funders.

**Q&A**

**Early-career researchers in the time of COVID-19: Benefits of structural support**

Dwi U. Kemaladewi
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RIKEN Cluster for Pioneering Research

**What steps has your institution taken in light of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

D.K.: My university provided a 1-year tenure clock extension, for which the faculty member can voluntarily opt-in. I immediately filed for it, and my 2nd year is currently paused until July 2021. Given that the lockdown was university-wide, I am surprised that some of my fellow junior faculty colleagues did not sign up for this seemingly supportive option. Although I understand that everyone’s situation is different, I cannot fully comprehend how one would not think that the pandemic negatively affects their career trajectory. Somehow, it introduces another layer of “worries” about whether my university would evaluate my future tenure document differently, compared to those of my peers who did not file for the tenure clock extension. I wonder whether a policy on automated extension given to all junior faculties (instead of an option to opt-in) would be better.

K.K.: RIKEN shut down starting in April 2020 and was gradually relaxed after late May. The institute lifted many of their regulations on working hours and locations to adapt to the COVID-19 situation. More recently, they have taken this opportunity to declare a transformation toward a more flexible working style and more efficient administrative processes. For instance, document digitization was happening very slowly before the pandemic, but now at least some of the personnel and accounting paperwork can be filed all online.

**Have your funding bodies taken any steps? Have you had any communications or guidance about grant extensions or expectations for preliminary data for grant applications?**

D.K.: COVID-19 impacts the fundraising activities on disease-specific foundation supporting my lab’s work. Fortunately, there are no cuts to active grants, although some payments were deferred to later times of the year and/or paid in installments. All funding agencies provided a six-month extension on both the grant spending and milestone reporting.

K.K.: Similar to other countries, many grants and fellowships in Japan extended their application deadlines for last year and this year. Last year, RIKEN offered an additional budget for personnel expenses in labs and to prepare for unexpected cuts to external grants or extensions of employment periods. Researchers in the institutional postdoc position (SPDR) have also been given the option to extend their contract duration for up to six months.

**What do you think would help?**

D.K.: I submitted grants during the lockdown and have started receiving reviewer comments that mention lack of corresponding author papers and preliminary data. This perplexes me, given that (I think) the effect of the pandemic on scientific productivity seems well-accepted globally. I think it would help to educate reviewers and/or amend the metrics on how Early-Stage Investigator (ESI) grants are evaluated.

At a more general level, since a majority of NIH grantees had minimal productivity during 2020 while personnel salaries were being covered, it would be great if NIH can provide some additional funds, possibly in the form of a one-time COVID supplement. It would demonstrate NIH’s support of the grantee community.

K.K.: RIKEN has been generally supportive, and luckily our lab and research have not been seriously damaged during this period. Although the situation may change next year, current concerns are more about the people than the budget. Trainees have fewer opportunities to present their work and connect with outside researchers, which will likely
have consequences on their career. We will benefit if conferences and talk series held outside of our time zone are less hesitant to invite young researchers in Japan despite the large time difference!

Have you altered strategies in how you approach securing funding? How?
D.K.: Yes. I have been focusing my efforts toward ESI-targeted funding calls, which require no preliminary data. Examples of such calls are NIH Director’s New Innovator Award and the Stephen I. Katz Early-Stage Investigator Research Project Grant—both support innovative projects for which no preliminary data exist.

What sort of additional support, resources, or flexibility have your trainees received from your institution due to the pandemic?
D.K.: Very minimal; during the summer months, the health insurance coverage for students works on a reimbursement basis. It created a lot of anxiety for the graduate students—many of whom are international students and have no support system in the US. I believe that the university could have taken more appropriate steps and alleviated this policy. However, the leadership at the graduate school I am affiliated with has discussed and planned several corrective measures in the past year. I am optimistic that the students will receive continuous health insurance coverage this year.

K.K.: The lifting of the regulations on working style was a plus for many of the members; some have been able to shift their working time so that they can spend more time with their family. For others, who had difficulty working from home or had no choice but to work in the lab, there has been no great way to reward them other than by increasing their salary.

What kind of support have senior colleagues offered that has helped to navigate this past year?
D.K.: I was one year into my faculty position when the pandemic hit. I had met some of my colleagues by then, but there were a lot more whom I did not get to meet yet. Some senior colleagues in my department have reached out to me to have a socially distanced “coffee chat.” The conversation has been organic; it covers science, grant strategy, seemingly random people where our scientific networks intersect, and personal life. I am extremely fortunate to be surrounded by supportive colleagues who perform some sort of “pulse check” on me; however, I would advise junior researchers to proactively reach out to colleagues to “just chat.” A simple 30-minute conversation with no agenda may indeed surprise you!

K.K.: There have been multiple occasions of outreach from the director’s level, asking about the main concerns in the lab and whether the institute can help to resolve them. Regarding the transformation toward the new working style, the RIKEN headquarters has put up questionnaires to gather opinions from all members regarding what changes we should make in this period and has shared the results and the answers online.

With work and life blending even more than they have previously, have you received any support for shifting personal circumstances?
K.K.: Daycare shut down in April 2020, bringing crisis to working parents, and we discussed what could be possibly helpful in such situations. Although there was no obvious resolution, the institute was able to adopt a government program, which can compensate expenses for baby sitters, with the hope of making the option of hiring baby sitters more common in case there is another major lockdown (which we hope will not happen).

What advice can you share about identifying and asking for resources?
D.K.: I am a member of the Membership Engagement committee of the American Society of Human Genetics. We are creating a platform to provide continuous interactions among members throughout the year, whether there is a pandemic or not. This initiative involves both junior and senior scientists in the society and therefore has nurtured my professional growth in a productive manner. I would recommend grabbing any opportunity to volunteer in a professional society—if time permits.