

CMSR Implements COVID-19 On Campus and Off Campus Workplace Protocols

COVID-19 precautions forced CMSR investigators to temporarily spend some or most of their work days offsite and away from the lab, but its culture – and technology – ensured that scores of active research projects didn't skip a beat – and even launched new research related to COVID-19 itself.

CMSR reengineered its workflows as COVID-19 cases peaked in western New York in early spring, in response to University of Rochester Medical Center and New York state social distancing guidelines designed to prevent the spread of the virus. URMCC sent hundreds of workers work off-site to reduce the risk of transmission on its campus.

The team of 140 CMSR researchers, who are used to working collaboratively in their lab space on URMCC's campus, quickly adapted to the disruption in standard research practice. Everyone at CMSR worked off-site for some or most of their work time.

The change was dramatic, but the CMSR culture that encourages fluid and creative collaboration made the transition easier, according to Edward Schwarz, Ph.D., Richard and Margaret Burton Distinguished Professor of Orthopaedics and Director of CMSR. "We have 12 research labs in the CMSR, but no silos. Investigators from different labs are encouraged to work collaboratively within their own teams, and with extended CMSR team members."

"The ability to reach out to anyone in our organization for help with a problem, or to pursue a new research endeavor, enriches the learning environment here and elevates the quality of our research. So when COVID forced us to rapidly adapt to a new way of working virtually, off-site, for extended periods of time, I'm pleased that our entire team stepped up to support the new regulations from New York State and the NIH, and succeeded in driving their investigations forward."

CMSR researchers also directly participated in COVID-19 related research. The Eliseev lab performed testing for a local biotech company working on an anti-COVID drug. The testing was recommended by the Food and Drug Administration to facilitate the drug's approval. After getting CMSR and URMCC leadership approval, the Eliseev lab evaluated the drug's mitochondrial toxicity in cell cultures.

"Researchers willingly changed work patterns during this extraordinary time to keep ourselves, our URMCC/University colleagues, and the entire community safe. It speaks to our culture that we were able to do so successfully and continue at the same pace with our work."

Supporting their efforts: a formal code of conduct for the CMSR was established that outlined standards for working off-site and onsite. The code, which was signed by all CMSR members,

set clear expectations, including following New York State health precautions for social distancing and masking, as well as completing UPMC's daily online health screening that help track presence of COVID – data that's essential for the Medical Center to safely reopen.

Technology tools, including virtual meetings and team-based Google calendars, enabled labs to pursue their research and collaborate with colleagues even while working from home.

August 2020 update: With cases in Monroe County declining, UPMC is bringing back selected faculty and staff; 80 to 90 percent of investigators are returning to work on-site.

