COVID-19 Operational Updates

March 17, 2020

LAB ACTIVITIES

PLANNING SCENARIOS
   A. Prioritize research functions
   B. Lab supplies
   C. Social distancing
   D. Reduce density of lab personnel (trainees, staff, and investigators):
   E. Employ environmental controls in the lab:
   F. Update emergency contact information and critical personnel designations:
   G. Remote access

March 16, 2020

Investigators conducting human subject research

March 13, 2020

ESSENTIAL SERVICES
   Department of Laboratory Animal Resources (DLAR)
   Human and Animal Research Administration

Planning Information for Research Laboratories

Institutional Core Labs
March 17, 2020

LAB ACTIVITIES

Research leadership at UTHSA is closely monitoring the status of the COVID-19 pandemic to keep everyone safe while limiting disruption to research activities.

All announcements regarding changes to the University’s operations can be found on the institutional coronavirus updates at https://www.uthscsa.edu/notices/coronavirus-update. This is an extremely fluid situation, so it is recommended that you check back often to stay current on the details. A compiled list of research-related information is available at https://www.uthscsa.edu/vpr. A new research-specific COVID-19 online resource is being developed to provide updated information to the research community.

Our research labs, including core facilities, are mission-critical and we strongly recommend that all PIs and directors of core facilities develop contingency plans anticipating a possible personnel reduction due to illness and/or a partial or complete shutdown of the university. This note provides guidelines for members of the research community to navigate this challenging time and assist in emergency planning.

PLANNING SCENARIOS

A. Prioritize research functions:

- Assess and prioritize critical laboratory activities that require regular attention by personnel (trainees, staff, and investigators). For example, cell cultures, animal studies, breeding programs, changing N₂ tanks, etc.

- Identify experiments that can be ramped down, curtailed or delayed; in particular, consider not initiating new long-term or large-scale experiments.

- Remember to obtain regulatory approval (IACUC or IRB) if changes are made to protocols (iaccp@uthscsa.edu; for IRB protocols, please review the posted IRB guidance to determine how and when changes should be reported to IRB at: http://research.uthscsa.edu/irb/COVID.pdf)

- Consider “stockpiling” experiments that can be analyzed later, or freezing tissues or cell lines in favor of undertaking new studies

- Plan for alternatives if institutional cores or other shared services are not available (please contact Dr. Ramiro Ramirez-Solis if you have any questions)

B. Lab supplies

Lab personnel (trainees, staff and investigators) should anticipate a shortage of lab supplies, including personal protective equipment (PPE), and should limit the number of personnel entering lab areas or conducting experiments that require PPE (masks, gowns, face shields, etc.). As the
University works through meeting the PPE needs of the clinical and research missions, there may be circumstances in which PPE is made available only by request. Each school is implementing a point of contact for this purpose, please contact your Dean’s Office for guidance.

C. Social distancing is an effective measure to prevent COVID-19 from spreading. It is strongly recommended that all non-essential meetings be conducted online rather than face-to-face.

D. Reduce density of lab personnel (trainees, staff, and investigators):

- Consider alternating shifts or work days
- If possible, increase space between individuals at benches (6 feet apart)
- Carry out “desk functions” such as data entry, ordering, writing etc. from home to reduce time required in the laboratory

E. Employ environmental controls in the lab:

- Regularly disinfect surfaces, handles of refrigerators/freezers, and other objects that are touched by multiple individuals
- Consider impacts on neighboring laboratories in open-lab settings (e.g. STRF)
- Keep hand sanitizer available and soap containers filled
- Secure all high-risk materials (chemicals, biohazard and radioactive)

F. Update emergency contact information and critical personnel designations:

- Ensure that emergency contact information is current at the lab, department and school levels
- Update contact information for freezers; liquid nitrogen containers and other essential pieces of equipment
- Request that laboratory personnel share contact information with each other
- Establish a communication plan (via email, group texts, go-to-meeting, etc.)
- Cross-train personnel on critical functions
- Consider:
  a) What would you do if your group or department were quarantined or unable to come to work? Arrange help from other lab groups (separated enough not to be affected by a quarantine), who could help maintain critical operations
  b) Plan for a scenario in which only one person per day is allowed to complete the essential activities for your laboratory (e.g., animal monitoring, cell culture maintenance, or
equipment maintenance). Consider using a Google calendar to organize and communicate schedules.

G. Remote access

- Ensure that personnel who will work from home have hardware, internet and access to information, analysis software and video conferencing software.
- Test remote work technologies. Consider if VPN is required
- Ensure access to copies of data without taking primary data home (i.e. box, lab archives)

In all cases, we urge you to prioritize the safety of yourselves, your lab group members (trainees, staff and investigators), and the broader community. For any questions or concerns, please contact the Office of the Vice President for Research at VPR@uthscsa.edu

March 16, 2020

Investigators conducting human subject research:

We anticipate that human subjects research will be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of your due diligence, please prepare for impact on normal operations. We will continue to provide updates/policy modifications specific to human subjects research as they become available.

In order to: i) mitigate the risk for both employees and research participants, ii) ensure that providers are available to perform clinical duties, and iii) preserve personal protective equipment for clinical care, we request that you consider the following with regard to your current research projects involving direct contact with research participants.

While human subjects research is not being restricted unilaterally, all PIs must review their protocols to determine whether a pause in research activity may be warranted. We will evaluate the need for further restrictions in the coming days based on the evolving conditions.

Continuation of the following types of studies is deemed appropriate:

- therapeutic research wherein there are limited/no treatment alternatives,
- FDA "Treatment" or "Emergency Use" studies,
- studies in which interruption/delay of research could cause significant harm to current research subjects.

For the continuation of all other types of human subject research, the PI must obtain permission from the appropriate departmental chair or center/institute director. Determinations to continue studies must be in alignment with both the ethical principles of human subject research and the safety of employees. We strongly recommend documenting these decisions.
In making a decision to proceed with human subjects research, we recommend the following considerations.

- Is the risk/benefit ratio for in-person contact acceptable?
- Does the study provide direct drug or device therapeutic benefit?
- Is any travel required of participants or employees appropriate, given current travel restrictions?
- Can study procedures be modified to minimize in-person contact (e.g., remote data collection)?
- If the study proceeds, what modifications are necessary to mitigate risk to human subjects and employees (note, there are currently restrictions on PPE for research).
- Is it necessary to pursue new enrollments? Follow-up visits?
- Note, please review the posted IRB guidance to determine how and when changes should be reported to IRB. (Please review the COVID-19 guidance on IRB review at: http://research.uthscsa.edu/irb/COVID.pdf)
- If you have questions or would like additional consultation in making a determination as it relates to protecting human subjects or IRB responsibilities, please contact Dr. Joseph Schmelz (schmelz@uthscsa.edu) or Dr. Kimberly Summers (summers@uthscsa.edu) 210-854-5671.

For questions or information related to departmental chair or center/institute director approval for research continuation please contact your respective Dean for Research.

SOM- Dr. Jennifer Potter (potterjs@uthscsa.edu)

SOD- Dr. Brigh Singh (singhbb@uthscsa.edu)

SON- Dr. Jing Wang (wangj1@uthscsa.edu)

SHP - Dr. Timothy Reistetter (reistetter@uthscsa.edu)

March 13, 2020

MESSAGE FOR RESEARCH COMMUNITY
Andrea Giuffrida, Vice President for Research
(210) 567-3720 | Giuffrida@uthscsa.edu

Below is a list of important information about the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic might have on university research operations. We ask the research community to maintain awareness of the dynamic nature of the events through regular monitoring of official communications from the
Centers for Disease Control, the World Health Organization and the university for Coronavirus Updates at https://www.uthscsa.edu/notices/coronavirus-update

Although we might experience some temporary change for workforce support to include remote work options, the Office of the Vice President for Research and all the essential services provided by the Department of Laboratory Animal Resources (DLAR), Research Protection Programs (IRB, IACUC, OCR), and Clinical Trials Office (CTO) will continue to operate and maintain compliance with federal and state regulations.

We do not anticipate significant disruption of the services provided by the Office of Technology Commercialization (OTC), Research IT, Office of Postdoctoral Affairs, Research Partnerships, Conflict of Interest and Research Integrity, as those operations can continue remotely.

ESSENTIAL SERVICES

Department of Laboratory Animal Resources (DLAR)
DLAR has the flexibility to adjust to possible increases in employee absenteeism to ensure continued support of research animal health and husbandry.
- Current services will continue.
- There are no plans to specifically limit access to research animals. Vivarium access will be dependent on the same conditions governing campus access.
- Should there be a decrease in DLAR personnel, animal care practices will be adjusted such that animal health remains the priority.
- Current investigator or protocol specific services (e.g. training, protocol support, surgical support) may be curtailed or discontinued depending on DLAR personnel availability.
- Investigators and their staff conducting animal research are reminded to contact the DLAR administration (Director and Associate Directors) for questions or concerns related to the availability of DLAR services as the need arises.

Human and Animal Research Administration
We understand that some changes to ongoing human and animal research may be expected in response to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Our priority is to ensure the safety and welfare of our research subjects.

All business operations of the Research Administration offices (IRB, IACUC, OCR & CTO), including submission, review and approval can be performed remotely should the need arise.
- Staffing across our offices can be adjusted as our staff are cross-trained, and our business processes are standardized.
- IRB & IACUC convened meetings can be conducted using web-based approaches or conference calls.
- We have the capacity to convene unscheduled meetings if the need arises.

Investigators should keep in mind that multicenter clinical research may be affected by the conditions at the individual performance sites. Please stay in touch with the sites and their
institutional offices. In addition, site investigators should check with the lead investigator or regulatory sponsor for any changes in the study.

Planning Information for Research Laboratories

While the Health Science Center has robust emergency response plans in place to maintain general activities, we encourage all research labs across the schools to prepare their own emergency plans detailing how they intend to continue their research activities should there be a workforce reduction due to illness or inability to come to work. PIs are the persons best positioned to develop a continuity plan for their labs.

Practical actions to consider include:

- Identify all critical research activities that require regular personnel attention and share your work plan with colleagues who might help you (e.g., maintenance of cell cultures).
- Cross train lab members to perform critical functions. If possible, reduce or delay large scale experiments.
- Consider to pre-order critical supplies as they may be out of stock or affected by shipping delays.
- Plan for one individual to carry on activities generally conducted by multiple lab staff to minimize the number of entry and exits and changes of PPE.
- Update the emergency contact list, identify the lab point of contact and share his/her email and phone number with your lab personnel.
- Add on-line meeting options to all your scheduled meetings.
- Check IT equipment for working from home and remote conferencing.
- Contact DLAR personnel for specific requests.
- Secure all high-risk materials (chemicals, biohazard and radioactive).

Please start planning NOW and reach out to our office (VPR@uthscsa.edu) for any questions.

Institutional Core Labs

In case of reduced workforce, you may experience delays in the analysis/processing of your samples. Please contact Dr. Ramiro Ramirez-Solis with any questions (210) 567-2059.