

MAINTAINING HOSPITAL-BASED RESEARCH ACTIVITIES DURING COVID-19

Toronto Academic Health Science Network

PURPOSE

The purpose of this document is to provide common principles and guidance to TAHSN hospitals regarding the maintenance of hospital based research activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The overall goal is to maintain a functioning and safe environment to continue hospital-based research amidst current and future surges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

BACKGROUND

As academic hospitals, research and training are core components of our tri-partite mission of quality care, teaching, and research. Through coordinated efforts early in the pandemic, TAHSN organizations developed an overall approach for safely resuming research activities as part of [TAHSN's Academic Recovery Strategy](#), and have since worked to create safe work environments for staff and trainees in our research facilities. As current and future surges of the COVID-19 pandemic have become a reality in our environment, hospital based research institutes must adapt appropriately to maintain research activity to continue to foster discovery and drive innovation.

CONSIDERATIONS

Maintenance of research activities should be integrated and aligned with broader hospital recovery activities and monitoring to ensure coordinated planning (e.g., clinical activities, education activities, PPE supplies, visitor policies, etc.). Activities may fluctuate, scaling up or down as appropriate.

Factors such as the spread of COVID-19 and the ability to implement protective and preventative measures in hospital based facilities need to be considered. Hospital based research facilities should adhere to the most current applicable local, provincial, and federal public health guidelines, directions from Ontario Health, and relevant regulatory bodies.

In addition, hospital based research facilities should monitor triggers within their organizations that may warrant action to mitigate risk, including:

- Confirmed COVID-19 cases and outbreaks
- Overall workforce capacity and supervisor availability
- Critical supplies, including PPE which is targeted for a rolling 30-day stock on-hand, that includes the current usage rate plus the forecasted additional academic recovery requirements
- The facility's ability to maintain physical distancing requirements, dependent on the volume of individuals in the building

PRINCIPLES FOR MAINTAINING RESEARCH

The following principles will support a safe work place environment for hospital based research facilities operating during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Safety** – The safety of our teams is of utmost priority. Hospital based research facilities must adhere to the most current applicable local, provincial, and federal public health guidelines, directions from Ontario Health, and direction from relevant regulatory bodies related to precautionary measures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Awareness / Education** - All staff, graduate students and trainees within the research facility must be appropriately prepared and familiar with organization-specific protocols, policies and procedures for on-site and remote work.
- **Transparency** – Research facilities should commit to a transparent approach to communication related to COVID-19 cases on their premises, including:
 - **Notification of positive COVID-19 cases** - organizations should have a plan for notifying staff of positive COVID-19 cases within their research facilities for the purposes of containing spread and ensuring the safety of staff
 - **Communication of overall numbers** – organizations should establish an approach for sharing up to date number of COVID-19 cases confirmed within their research facilities during a specific period of time
- **Safe Occupancy Levels** – Suggested organizational occupancy during phase 3 of TAHSN Research’s Academic Recovery Strategy is up to 50% to 100% at any one time.¹ Safe occupancy levels, along with strategies such as remote work, where possible, staggered hours, and safely scheduled work bursts for experimental activities will facilitate operating close to full capacity.
- **Sufficient Capacity** – Throughout the pandemic, organizations will need to accommodate and plan for staff absences due to the need to self isolate, to care for family (e.g. children) who must self isolate, or other reasons related to the pandemic. Decisions to initiate new experiments or to either continue or halt existing experiments and research activities should be based on local confidence in availability of appropriate staffing.
- **Adhere to Local IPAC / Occupational Health and Safety Policies** - Declared outbreaks must be managed as per local IPAC and Occupational Health and Safety protocols. Graduate students based in hospital research institutes should follow the protocols and standard operating procedures (SOP) established by the hospital where they are based as opposed to those established by the University, if such University policies are different than those of the hospital.
- **Adapt to Changes in Health System Guidance** - Local policies, protocols and SOPs within research facilities should be adjusted and adapted regularly to align with the most current guidance from the health system and applicable regulatory bodies, (e.g. Ontario’s COVID-19 Response Framework)
- **Minimize / Understand Movement of Staff and Trainees Across Organizations** – Where possible, hospital research institutes should minimize the movement of team members across organizations. Where such movement may be necessary, organizations should have a plan to ensure that staff and trainees understand and adhere to the local IPAC and Occupational Health safety protocols.
- **Clinical Research Mirrors Changes in Clinical Care** – Clinical research activity should mirror changes in practice of clinical care to ensure alignment and coordinated planning in terms of ramping up/down where necessary to ensure safety of patients, staff and trainees.
- **Vaccination** - All current precautionary measures and practices remain in place even as research staff, students and trainees receive vaccinations. No specific changes to approach are recommended based on vaccination alone. Organizations must monitor and adhere to public health guidance on appropriate changes that can be made in response to overall vaccination levels.

¹ Source: [TAHSN Academic Recovery Strategy & Guidelines](#) (Updated April 2021), p. 18

STRATEGIES

It is recommended that the following previously established strategies continue to be leveraged throughout the pandemic.²

- **Clinical research outside of hospital:** Where possible, clinical research should be conducted virtually and off-site. Clinical researchers should coordinate with respective Research Ethics Boards (REBs) in order to optimize clinical research that can take place outside of the hospital. This includes, for example, considerations regarding patient consent, remote access to necessary resources and tools, and safety protocols.
- **Working from home:** All staff and research trainees that can continue to effectively contribute from home should do so, with support and coordination with their supervisors. This includes essential staff that are coming into the organization to carry-out specific activities but who don't need to remain for the whole day.
- **Staggered work start/finish times** to avoid crowding in common areas such as lobbies and elevators. This will also enable staff and research trainees to avoid rush hours on public transit.
- **Working in shifts / cohorts:** Depending on the kinds of activities and the areas involved, staff and research trainees should be encouraged to work in shifts, or on alternating days while continuing to work from home. Where feasible, establishing cohorts of staff assigned to consistently work together during their shifts is encouraged and will further minimize number of people staff come into contact with.
- **Graduate students and staff well-being** should be considered throughout the pandemic. This includes demands related to personal situations (i.e., health, childcare and care of family members, and changes in academic requirements/environments) as well as strategies to support morale of research teams.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

[University of Toronto Dashboard for Tracking Covid-19 Cases](#) - Example of a communication tool utilized by the University of Toronto for transparently sharing number of confirmed cases at any given time.

[TAHSN Checklist for Restarting Research](#) – Tool developed by TAHSN to summarize key actions in resuming research activity as part of Academic Recovery efforts.

[TAHSN COVID-19 Resources](#) – Repository of guidance documents and resources developed by TAHSN to support academic health science centres during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

[Ontario COVID-19 Response Framework](#) – The province's framework outlining public health measures to be implemented in response to changing levels of risk in the community.

Prepared and Approved by:
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² Source: [TAHSN Academic Recovery Strategy & Guidelines](#) (Updated April 2021), p. 17