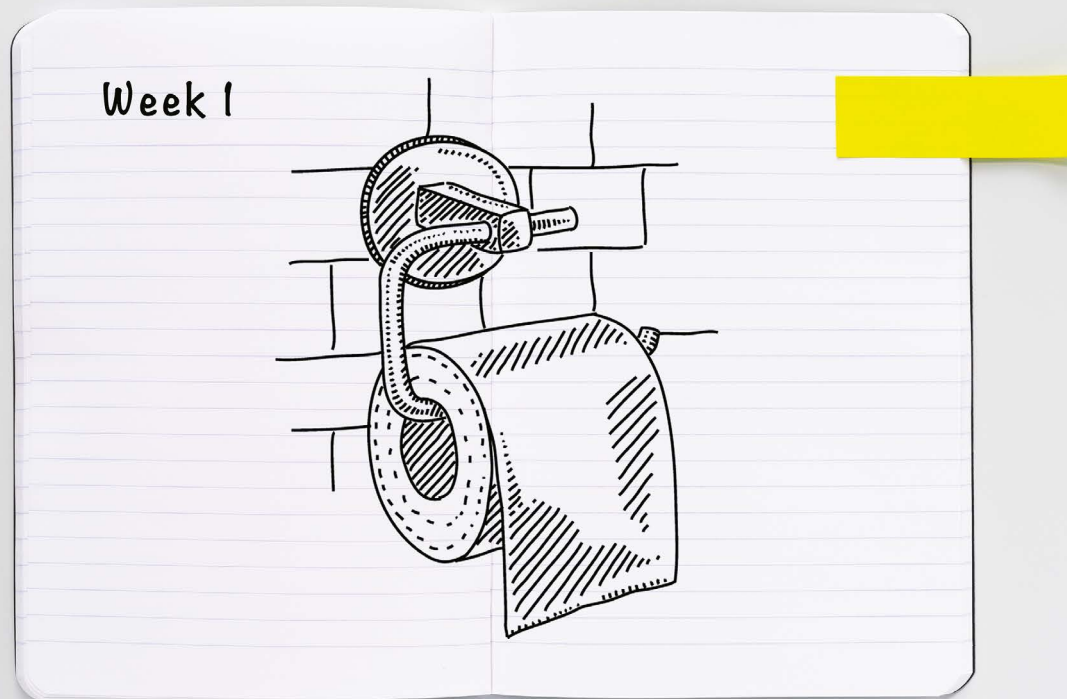




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## CORONAVIRUS DIARIES: A NEW WORLD OF WORK

John Tregoning's weekly COVID-19 diary entries reveal the highs and lows of remote working while homeschooling two children.

**T**wenty years after starting my PhD and 12 years into running my own research group, focusing on respiratory infections, at Imperial College London, I would describe myself as a mid-career scientist. With the job title of reader (somewhere between an associate and full professor), I'm seen as impossibly old by my PhD students, and as a relative newbie by the more senior profs.

Of course, that was under normal circumstances.

To help navigate through the current experience, I started a diary, which *Nature* agreed to publish. I hope that my experience will be similar to that of other scientists – not those on the front line in the wards, or

developing diagnostics, vaccines and cures, but the vast majority of us, at every level of career, who are now adjusting to life away from the laboratory. Hopefully it will make someone, somewhere, smile and realize we are all going through versions of the same experience.

You can read all of my diary entries at [nature.com/careers](https://www.nature.com/careers)

### WEEK ONE HELLO FROM HOME

I realize that, compared with many scientists and many more members of the public worldwide, I am in a privileged position. I'm a tenured principal investigator, so most likely will have

a job to return to, and I have a house – with a garden – which holds more than three rolls of toilet paper. But the uncertainty is unsettling as we step into the unknown with all kinds of issues: what happens to the economy and what that might mean for science; the likelihood of getting a nasty infection; uncertainty over when I will be able to buy more bread flour.

In addition to being an academic, I am a father to children aged 10 and 12, and a husband to my wife, who is also a scientist. So, for both of us, one of the biggest challenges is going to be how to fit full-time work around looking after the children. Under normal circumstances, parenting is mostly logistics. We just about balance childcare through a combination of school, clubs and childminders. This

## Work/Careers

juggling act gives us enough time to fit in most of a week's work.

Given that my family is all now at home more or less 24/7, apart from the time allowed for exercise in the UK government's guidelines, things are going to have to change. In future columns, I will try to chart the changes I go through and identify what, if anything, has worked in balancing home, career and personal life. But I'll also aim to share the things that haven't. I'm already keen to write about the loss of identity I've felt with closing my lab, how I'm trying to maintain a healthy relationship with social media, the challenges of remote supervision and how to make the tallest Lego tower to win the school competition. In addition to my home family, I still have a responsibility to my work family – the students and staff members who work in my lab – and I'm still working out the best way of maintaining contact and keeping the science going.

One of the things I love about academia is the predictable patterns. The year starts in October; grant opportunities come and go. Having never really worked full-time anywhere other than academia, not counting the summer job in the refrigerated warehouse, the idea of doing anything different is terrifying. But here is an opportunity, unsought. Maybe we can all try different ways of working and being with our families. Then again, it might just be awful. Like everyone else, I'm still working it out.

### WEEK TWO TO BE A SCIENTIST



For me, one of the biggest things to come to terms with, as I'm locked down in the United Kingdom, is not being able to go to my lab or my office. I realized the extent to which I was missing work when I told my children to get the ice cream from the freezer in the lab, actually meaning the garage – my subconscious speaking volumes.

Shutting the lab down came as a bit of a shock, despite the warning signs from other countries' responses to the coronavirus outbreak, and the increasingly grim news from the epidemiology modellers downstairs. I'd done some preparation the week before – mostly

making plans with my PhD students and lab technicians about where they might best see out the next few weeks (at home with family or in their London flats). But there were several unanswered questions causing me angst:

- What were my lab-facing team members going to do with their time?
- What was I going to do with my time?
- Who was going to water my office plants?

The real challenge, though, is deeper than working out what to do with my and my teams' working hours. It revolves around personal identity. So much of how I see myself is tied up with what I do as a job. I am a father, a husband, a brother. But I'm also a scientist and an academic. One of the great things about being a scientist is the close overlap between job and personal interests. But there can be times when the close relationship between science and self gets out of kilter and science takes over. There are waves of intensity, normally peaking around the time of grant deadlines, when I can think of little else.

Now, however, I'm in new territory. Not having a lab to go to will have an impact on more than just work productivity. It isn't necessarily just lab work that will be affected – I am the first to admit that I am not in the lab itself very much during the week. Like most principal investigators, I spend much of my time working on the leadership, funding and administrative tasks that spring up around wet-lab work – but the proximity to it and the interactions with my team in the lab are all part of the job. Working from home occasionally was an excellent way to get a piece of focused thinking done, but the appeal soon disappears when it is the only option.

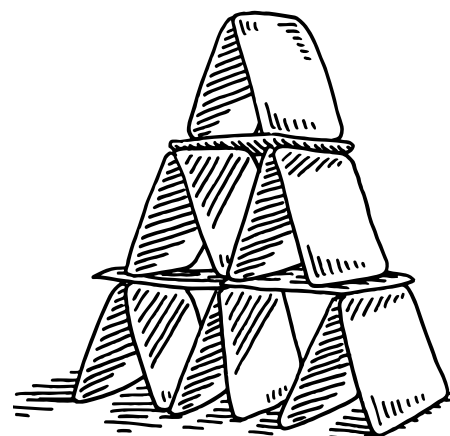
On reflection, I would, in part, link my identity as a scientist to the discovery of new things, or at least living vicariously through the work my wonderful team does. In her fantastic book *Lab Girl*, Hope Jahren describes the moment she made her first discovery and how this led her to an academic career. When I was doing my BSc, my supervisor pointed out that I was seeing down the microscope. It wasn't anything spectacular, but it was enough to get me hooked. These little moments of discovery are hard to achieve from my home office.

On deeper reflection, it isn't only the discoveries that drive me, but the story-telling that builds from them – stringing individual discoveries into an epic scientific tale. As my team would attest, there isn't always a solid plan at the beginning; the science builds organically from one point to the next. Each experiment leads to the next: a thread running through them from beginning to end. When your approach to planning work depends on the experiments, it is bloody hard to plan the next step without the experiments.

I need to remind myself that the current situation is temporary, if open-ended. I have had a similar challenge before: in parallel with doing my PhD and postdoc, I was an officer in the Army Reserves for ten years, and when I left, I had the feeling 'if I am not an army officer, what am I?' Turns out, it wasn't such a big deal, I was still me, even if I wasn't marching up and down the parade square. I imagine the experience was not dissimilar to retiring – which is probably why so few academics do actually retire.

And of course, I'm sure that once I'm back in the lab, the excitement will fade with the first failed polymerase chain reaction.

### WEEK THREE SCHOOL'S OUT FOREVER



For the record, the three people whom I would choose to be stuck with in the same house for 4 weeks (and counting) are my wife and two children (aged 10 and 12), and if it was just a prolonged holiday with no responsibilities, it would be wonderful. Unfortunately, we all still have work to do – whether it's grants to write or a space-exploration school curriculum to study. I've enjoyed spending more time with the children since lockdown began, but being in the same space as them for four weeks has required even more juggling.

I had thought that being a working parent was tough under normal circumstances: it involves a lot of planning. My wife and I try to keep our diaries coordinated and outsource the tasks we can, by getting help from my wife's personal assistant, our cleaner, childminders and our kids' school. We are very fortunate that we normally have this support, giving us the time and space to focus on work and the more fun aspects of parenting.

You might be reading about people who seem to be effortlessly balancing the house-of-cards of home-working and homeschooling: up with the YouTube fitness coach Joe Wicks; story time with the author David Walliams; a quick trip to the virtual zoo, while baking, cleaning and grant writing. The reality for me is rather different.