



Postponement of conference due to COVID-19

The conference will be rescheduled for 26-29 September 2021



26-29 SEPTEMBER 2021 | SPIER WINE ESTATE

Please visit <http://www.sacoronavirus.co.za> for more information on COVID-19!

Bioinformatics @ HOME: Teaching, Programming and Baking

Prof. Scott Hazelhurst: One of the strange parts of lock-down is that although it is a shared experience, we all experience it in a different way as our social circles contract. Even though we often spend hours in meetings each day each in our own bubble we don't really know how others work and live. As lock-down started, I thought my teaching was winding down. I've been teaching a very large second year class and instead of just giving the last few lectures of my course, I had to put those lectures on video and prepare lots of other online material for students to access. Dealing with project problems, special cases and bandwidth issues as we jumped from platform to platform all soaked up time and I could rely less on our team of TAs. I tried to keep a regular schedule with my undergrad class, meeting with them each week doing lectures and tuts, and even made sure I was dressed much more formally than usual, wearing tie and jacket, and once my academic dress. I must admit to attending many meetings in pajamas. At the same time the research pressure has been considerable. I'm very fortunate to have a very productive set of students and postdocs and great colleagues, who've been working non-stop so keeping up with them has been completely exhausting though incredibly rewarding. Working with colleagues at Wits and our collaborators in H3A and H3ABioNet has continued well though they've been plenty of times where an hour together in the same room would have been so helpful. I think it's shown how important building good relationships is that we've been able to continue working. My daily routine completely changed — I prefer to keep a break between work and home so I've found it much harder to keep the distinction and sometimes day and night blend into each other, especially as some of our social structure disappears. I have found it very difficult to keep up exercise. My one achievement has been to do some baking bread with some mixed success. My first attempt based on a cousin's recipe was a disaster. My wife had to point out that the recipe called for 3/4 of a cup of oil, not 3 to 4 cups. Why our family can't write their recipes using LaTeX, I do not know. But now I have a good sourdough starter though not near the standard of colleagues and friends at the SBIMB. A friend did point out that it is only men who are boasting of their baking on Facebook, but we have so little to boast about, we have to. This is a good time to reflect on how we are going to work and live in the next 6 months — the last 3 months operating in emergency mode as we feel our way through. Our usual social structure changed completely so I think a big challenge for us all is how we keep social connections strong over this time, reach out to those in our community who need different types of help and do teaching and research that make the world a better place.



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Staff & Students @ HOME: How has the COVID-19 pandemic & lock-down affected you?



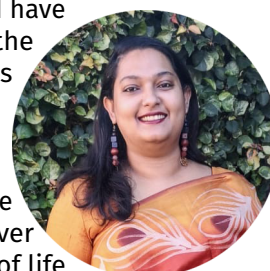
Ms. Busisiwe Mthembu (BioBank Lab Assistant): As a laboratory assistant who works in a research based lab/biobank, I had to stay home during this lock-down. I had to follow rules and regulations just like everyone else to assist in preventing the spread of COVID-19 and to keep safe. However, working from home has been both nice and challenging at the same time. Challenging in the sense that there were various issues that were inhibiting my levels of productivity such as bad/slow network connection, change in sleeping patterns which resulted in me working more during the night time or early morning hours. We (as the biobank team) had to put the actual lab work on hold, as our work revolves around the laboratory and we had to focus on the admin side of things relating to the lab. This period has also been a bit lonely as I miss interacting with my colleagues and friends, although social media is available it just hasn't been the same. The nice part of lock-down is that I got a chance to work at the comfort of my home (in pajamas). I got to enroll for some online courses (for personal skills development purposes). I also managed to focus on taking better care of myself in terms of having balanced meals and being consistent with exercise, and taking care of my overall mental health by being around those I care about and doing things that make me happy in my spare time.

Ms. Merusha Naidoo (PhD): The COVID-19 lock-down hasn't really affected my work, as I am able to work online for now. I've managed to rearrange my work plan so that I still make progress during the pandemic. I am accustomed to living alone and working in a quiet environment, so it is a bit challenging working from my parent's home. Humans are social beings, and not being able to interact physically with others is somewhat depressing. Thankfully social media seems to be working, in terms of making us feel connected. Physical activity has definitely decreased during the lock-down period! My family has taken to showcasing their culinary skills. This combined with lack of physical activity is not doing me any favors, however our family now has time to sit down and eat meals together.



Ms. Micaela Eisenberg (MSc): I was away from home during lock-down so the experience was spent far from my family and support system. The distance forced me to connect with loved ones with messaging and to form friendships with people in close proximity. My work became both a reason for purpose and stress when my motivation was low. Additionally, planning ahead for future in such uncertain times seemed largely impossible. This also included trying to find a way to return home when most air travel was suspended. Even then, to maintain normalcy, I continued to exercise as a way to keep active.

Mrs. Jenny Mathews (PhD): The lock-down has taught me to be grateful for a lot of things that I have taken for granted. Going for leisurely walks and coffee dates with my husband are some of the things I miss the most. I miss hanging out with family and friends. I miss going for long drives just for the joy of being out. Being in a lock-down with a 11 month old has been a roller coaster ride by itself. I have had days where I have only been able to do less than 10% of the work that I had intended to do. Being in the last phase of my PhD and not being able to put in as much work as I would like to has been quite frustrating. It takes your mental health for a toss. I have had a few days where I've struggled to get out of bed or be productive because of anxiety over thoughts like will I be able to finish my PhD, will the lock-down ever end, will this be the end of life the way we know it so far and so on. But on the other hand I have learned to cherish the little things like the million watt smile my little one gives me when she sees me first thing in the morning. I love the breakfasts my husband has been making me. We have loved trying out recipes that we never would have had otherwise. I have high appreciation for our nanny. Looking after a little one day in and day out is no easy feat. Here's to looking forward to the end of the lock-down and for life to getting back to the way we've all known it. Until then, stay safe.





Mr. David Twesigomwe (MSc): The lock-down due to the COVID-19 pandemic has had both a positive and negative impact on my academic and social life. On the bright side, I have managed to put lots of hours into developing a bioinformatics pipeline for my project and also to revise my first manuscript. I even had time to write a poem on “Bioinformatics in Africa” for the H3ABioNet Africa Day Competition :) I am also quite excited about attending some virtual conferences and presenting my work from home. On the negative side, the wet-lab part of my project has taken a bit of a blow. I also miss the outdoor sports activities that act as a stress reliever in my normal routine. Even though Zoom, Microsoft Teams and the like have helped keep me in touch with my friends, colleagues and supervisors, I really miss the holistic environment at the SBIMB.

Ms Mmatshupo Taunyane (Research Administrator): I think COVID-19 became real for me when the lock-down was announced, this was when I fully understood the seriousness of the disease. We had never experienced something like this in our lifetime, I even learned a new word, it was unprecedented. My behavior and perception changed from then, necessary precautions were followed, I made sure I washed my hands every time I touched something, the house was sanitized. It gets you a bit paranoid, but this virus is deadly, so rather paranoid and safe, not forgetting the immune boosters I took daily. For the past two months of lock-down I can count the number of days I actually left the yard, I think about 3-5 times and this was all to go out for groceries, praying not to catch anything, suspicious looks everywhere. It was the longest time I had been locked up inside the courts of my home, a very interesting experience. My two nephews (6 and 9 years old) came to stay with us during this period cause their parents are essential workers. I think they kept me sane cause they kept us busy but they were pretty exhausting. Working from home got distracted by their constant need for food and a full sink of dishes that needed to be washed, nonetheless, I managed to get some work done, most of it during the night-time so that I can submit it in the morning. I’m glad I could work from home with my laptop and the internet. I just had to make sure they do not run into the Wi-Fi router and drop it, while I’m in a zoom meeting, it happened once though, that was the last time. I got some time to listen to my own thoughts as well, you get forced to think about your life goals when stuck in the house for a whole two months, some personal growth, I even cut my hair because I felt something has to change. Exercise also joined in as one of my routines, if I didn’t my body would literally feel numb. I could not wait to get back to work and plus I don’t think I had ever watched so much news in my life. We get to realize how fragile life is, a virus so small can disrupt humanity and leave us locked up in fear, but then again, life is beautiful. I do not know when, but this too shall pass or at least we will get a vaccine.



Mrs. Jocelyn Geyenga (Manager: Strategic Development): As manager of the SBIMB some of my responsibilities are to oversee budget and financial management for SBIMB grants; project management of various research projects, identifying funding opportunities and assist with grant applications, arrange meetings, workshops and coordinate logistics, plan and organize advisory board meetings and strategic meetings, plan visits for international scientists, compile reports (annual, quarterly & adhoc), manage recruitment process for new students, post-doctoral fellows and support staff and general day to day administration. Working from home during lock-down has been much smoother than I had expected, all I need was a laptop and good internet connectivity, fibre is the best, and I was able to continue working at ease. However the number of meetings did seem to double during this period, on most days I would spend half my day and on some days almost all day in and out of zoom meeting rooms which took time away from getting any work done. The personal challenges I faced was trying to juggle work time and family time, my 2-year old could not understand why I was locked up in one room for most of the day instead of playing with her, taking breaks was difficult as she would stick to me like glue whenever I came out. Home schooling my 13 year old in the midst of working and taking care of household chores was also tough. In general, I think my experience was better than most and I am grateful that I could work from home.





Recent Publications @ SBIMB (2019/2020)

- Agongo, G., Nonterah, E. A., Amenga-Etego, L., Debpuur, C., Kaburise, M. B., Ali, S. A. *et al.* (2020) Blood Pressure Indices and Associated Risk Factors in a Rural West African Adult Population: Insights from an AWI-Gen Substudy in Ghana *International Journal of Hypertension* **2020**, 1–11 doi: [10.1155/2020/4549031](https://doi.org/10.1155/2020/4549031).
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- Aramburu, O., Ceballos, F., Casanova, A., Le Moan, A., Hemmer-Hansen, J., Bekkevold, D. *et al.* (2020) Genomic Signatures After Five Generations of Intensive Selective Breeding: Runs of Homozygosity and Genetic Diversity in Representative Domestic and Wild Populations of Turbot (*Scophthalmus maximus*) *Frontiers in Genetics* **11** doi: [10.3389/fgene.2020.00296](https://doi.org/10.3389/fgene.2020.00296).
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SASBi-SC Update

Hi SASBi newsletter readers!

This year has been uneventful so far. Just as COVID-19 descended upon us, our trip to Grahamstown for the SciFest was unfortunately canceled. We decided to host an online symposium instead. It is set to take place on the 4th to the 6th of August 2020. The abstract submission deadline is the 3rd of July. Submit abstracts here: <https://forms.gle/vFv4VSJnXvPmTW6p9>.

We hope you have a student symposium at the next SASBi/SAGS conference, too. More details will be released closer to the time!

Keep safe!

The SASBi-SC executive team



Upcoming Events

Event: Conference - BioC 2020: Where Software and Biology Connect

Date: 27 -31 July 2020

Venue: Online/Virtual

Info: Click [here](#) for more information.

Event: Symposium - SASBi-SC Online Student Symposium

Date: 4 - 6 August 2020 (**Registration deadline: 3 July 2020**)

Venue: Online/Virtual

Info: Click [here](#) for more information.

Event: Course - 16SrRNA Microbiome Intermediate Bioinformatics Course

Date: September to November 2020 (exact dates and times to be confirmed)

Venue: Online/Virtual

Info: Click [here](#) for more information.

Event: Conference - International Congress on Human Genetics (ICHG)

Date: 07 - 11 March 2021

Venue: Cape Town

Info: Click [here](#) for more information.

Event: Conference - SASBi/SAGS BIO2021

Date: 26 - 29 September 2021

Venue: Cape Town

Info: Click [here](#) for more information.

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