SPECIAL MESSAGE TO COUNCIL MEMBERS: USask response to COVID-19

The University of Saskatchewan has been closely monitoring, preparing for and responding to the quickly evolving COVID-19 situation, which was recently declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. Our efforts at the University of Saskatchewan are focused on ensuring the health and safety of our campus community while maintaining, as appropriate and as best we can, our operations. As we evaluate how we do operate during the COVID-19 situation, we will continue to provide updates to the university’s responses. All recommendations will follow the best health-related, governmental and post-secondary sector advice and information available, and will be implemented to keep our campus community safe with as little disruption as possible to our students and employees. All updates are available at updates.usask.ca.

Each of us is experiencing much pressure and uncertainty at the moment, given the rapid developments of the pandemic. These are indeed challenging times for everyone in the world, and it is important that we remain as calm, clear in our thinking, informed by evidence, and communicative as possible. Being aware of the decisions being made by other sectors, and our own, is equally important. None of that is easy.

It is equally important for us all to support each other and to share concerns and advice and experiences. I can see that the Covid-19 pandemic is not only about physical health. As we increase the social distance between ourselves, and see the number of opportunities for socializing become drastically reduced around us and at the university, our mental health and that of our colleagues and friends will be impacted. I encourage you to find opportunities to keep yourselves mentally healthy and to take advantage of them — walking and exercising, staying connected with friends and colleagues and family.

Because I was in the U.S. until Sunday for university business, I am currently in self-isolation for the recommended two weeks. Many of the events and meetings I would otherwise have attended are now being held remotely, such as Council this week. I will be connected continually by email, text, phone and all other means available to me. Please do not hesitate to be in touch about anything of importance to you that you would otherwise have met with me or contacted me about.

I reiterate my appreciation to all of you for your understanding, and your continuing rapid responses to necessary changes being implemented at the university during these challenging times: I know that faculty, students, staff, and administrators have had to make, and endure, enormous changes to their work and personal lives. I and we are also indebted to the work that the Crisis Management Team and the Crisis Operations Team have undertaken to help ensure we are in the responsible and accountable place we are currently in. I understand this is a time of uncertainty and concern, but please be reassured by our planning process in this situation, and know that the health and safety of our campus community is our top priority. Difficult and unprecedented decisions will continue to be required of us. I thank you for your understanding, for making these decisions, for your support of these decisions, and for your support for each other in these difficult times.

Best regards,

Peter
VIDO-InterVac-led research team at USask awarded funding to fight coronavirus

The University of Saskatchewan is at the forefront of the international effort to fight the coronavirus. A USask research team lead by Darryl Falzarano of VIDO-InterVac, along with collaborating scientists from across the country, were awarded almost $1million to develop animal models and test vaccine candidates for effectiveness and safety. VIDO-InterVac’s Containment level 3 facility was built specifically for these types of situations and is ideally positioned to lead this type of project. The facility is also recognized for having developed animal models for other human diseases, including tuberculosis. To help improve Canada’s response and emergency preparedness, VIDO-InterVac is building a pilot-scale vaccine manufacturing facility. Other VIDO-InterVac researchers involved in the project include Dr. Vladi Karniychuk, Qiang Liu and Sylvia van den Derk.

Third annual māmowi āsohtētān Truth and Reconciliation Forum a success

On Friday, February 27th, I had the opportunity to attend the third annual māmowi āsohtētān ‘Let’s Cross this Together’ Internal Truth and Reconciliation Forum hosted by our Office of Indigenous Engagement. It was a true honor to be a part of this event and to be able to hear from distinguished Indigenous leaders including Phil Fontaine and the Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan, the Honorable Russ Merasty. Members from across our campus community had the opportunity to attend and be a part of this very important discussion. I want to extend a sincere thank you to Dr. Jackie Ottman and her organizing committee for the hard work invested in delivering on such a successful event.

College of Medicine receives top accreditation results

I want to congratulate the College of Medicine, and specifically Dean Preston Smith, for achieving strong results from the Committee on Accreditation of Canadian Medical Schools (CACMS). The College of Medicine has now earned the approval of the accrediting body across all 93 areas CACMS reviewed and will not be required to host another site visit until 2025 or 2026. I am proud of this achievement, given the efforts of faculty and staff to ensure this positive outcome.

$1.7M awarded by Health Canada for USask pilot project on opioid use

In early March, I had the opportunity to host the Honorable Jim Carr on campus to announce $1.7M in research funding to implement and assess a new pharmacist-led interprofessional model for chronic pain management aimed at helping to reduce opioid use and improve patient health. USask pharmacy researchers Drs. Derek Jorgenson and Katelyn Halpape will lead a team to implement and test the new approach. This will particularly benefit people at high risk of harm from opioids by identifying those who are good candidates for tapering down opioid doses.