2020 Hindsight

by Chris Willmott, Science Editor

As I hope all readers will have spotted, each issue of The Biochemist contains a series of articles on a particular theme. Topics for a period of time, typically the next year, are decided at an editorial board meeting (though suggestions from readers are welcomed at any time).

I would not be able to tell you who had first proposed the focus for each of the collections we've featured over the past 15 years, whilst I've been a member of the editorial team. However, I do know that the present volume is one of 'mine'. I have had a special interest in our amazing optical system since experiencing a detached retina in 2012 and, as a pun enthusiast, an issue on '2020 Vision' seemed too good to miss.

Of course, back in the middle of 2019, when we were selecting themes for this year's issues, no one saw how 2020 was going to pan(demic) out. The year 2020 has presented extraordinary disruption to our ways of living and working. Watching resolution of these difficulties has been fascinating, not least the ways changes to procedures and protocols, which were previously identified as 'impossible to alter', suddenly became not only feasible, but actively encouraged.

Some of the adjustments are likely to remain, long after any of the present restrictions are lifted. I'm sure, for example, that working from home (for at least part of the week) is going to be much more typical than it was previously, and our new-found expertise using tools such as Zoom, Teams and/or Collaborate means that there will be fewer face-to-face meetings and conferences in the future.

Clearly, there are certain activities that cannot simply 'pivot' to being online. We can teach some theoretical aspects of labwork via virtual experiments (using software previously branded as 'too expensive'), but developing manual dexterity requires physical interaction with equipment at some point. The situation has been especially problematic for the majority of PhD students whose research involves lab-based experiments. At the time of writing, different institutions are trialling a variety of ways to facilitate a socially distant return to the labs. Heartfelt best wishes to everyone who finds themselves wrestling with those quandaries.

Finally, if I may take the liberty of appending a public health warning to this editorial: You only have one set of eyes, take care of them. If you see unusual changes to your vision, especially flashes of light, don't hesitate to visit A&E. No one will resent giving you a clean bill of health if that is (hopefully) the outcome. However, if you do need treatment, knowledge derived from research, such as that described in some of the articles in this issue, might just come to your aid.