A letter to the flow community

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O dear, what an interesting, yet scary, time are we experiencing today. I remember that we were at the Flow Chemistry Europe meeting in Cambridge, still wondering what the impact could be of COVID-19. Maybe we were still underestimating it and hoping it would not affect us personally. Yet, 1 week later, caught up with the reality, I had to close my lab. Many amongst you are in the meanwhile in a similar situation.

Overnight, we were forced to transition pure laboratory experiments into theoretical work at home. In the beginning, this seemed easy enough as some papers needed to be written, anticipated reviews could be started earlier, and proposals could be drafted. However, we are now 1 month further and it all seems not that simple anymore. Those papers are written (overflowing my To Do list) and staying inside drives us crazy (as it doesn't allow us to keep as focused as we could have been). Some of you are scared of the future... how will this affect our laboratory or company? Will I be able to finish my practical work for that PhD defense planned in the fall? And others might have even more urgent concerns. Friends, family or even yourself might have COVID-19 and are fighting face-to-face with this nasty virus. And that is terrifying.

For sure, the crazy times we are in today will be a milestone in our lives. We will remember vividly how we spent our days. Personally, I have less meetings and more time for what really matters. More time for my family, more time for reading the literature and more time to reflect about the future of flow chemistry. So yes, despite all, there are also benefits to the covid-19 lockdown.

In the grand scheme of things, supply chains are currently questioned due to unavailability of key intermediates. We

have learned that pandemics can lead to the shutdown of entire countries. Governments first think about their own people and shipments with essential medicines (e.g. chloroquine with its debatable efficacy against covid-19) are blocked to aid the internal markets. While one can understand the rationale behind such decisions, we do need to rethink how these medicines are made and whether we are not too dependent on others. We should make sure that—in times of grave peril—we can always rely on sufficient quantities of life-saving medication. This gives opportunities to flow chemists. Small, multipurpose production units can be envisioned where such essential drugs can be made in small quantities, enough to supply the internal market. In my opinion, continuous-flow manufacturing will be key to enable such a transition.

All of this is to say: there is more work to do and flow chemists will be needed, now more than ever.

I wish you all the best in these crazy times. It probably will take some time before we see each other again in real life. Flow Chemistry USA and IMRET are already postponed to next year. Yet, someday soon, we will meet again and hopefully be able to shake hands and give each other shoulder pats. I am looking forward to that!

In the meanwhile, stay safe and healthy.

Timothy Noël

From my home office in Belgium, April 18, 2020.

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