



*Editorial*

## Keeping up the Hope

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Dear readers and authors of Xjenza Online, as Editor-in-Chief, I am very pleased to announce the release of the second issue of 2020 of Xjenza Online.

For the past year, the world has been through a terrible crisis which impacted on every aspect of our lives and work. In the higher education sector, in-person teaching, learning and research have faced severe disruptions or have been stopped altogether in order to curb the spread of COVID-19. Academic and student mobility has been reduced to the point that international research collaborations, conferences, visiting scholar and student exchange programmes were put on halt. Many research activities have also been threatened by the discontinuation of lab and field work. These interruptions have resulted not only in delayed or missed scholarship, but also in the loss of professional advancement and training for undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral researchers, not to mention the overall loss of human interaction from excess digitization. Nevertheless, this issue of Xjenza Online demonstrates once more the continuity of the scientific endeavour in the Maltese Islands, particularly the one drawn on the local research expertise.

The issue opens with an important and timely study by Martin, Desira and Zarb on the perceptions, beliefs and attitudes related to the use of face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Maltese Islands. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected via an online survey with a sample made up of 990 respondents. For the vast majority of respondents, wearing of face masks while interacting in public spaces (both indoors and outdoors) leads to a sense of security, with increased sense of confidence in public safety measures. However, the study revealed that the knowledge of the population on face coverings is significantly associated with the level of education, and the common beliefs include the mistaken facts that a visor offers as much protection as a face mask and that wearing a face mask reduces the amount

of oxygen available to breathe. Qualitative data also highlighted challenges linked to communication, heat, discomfort, anxiety about lack of oxygen, breathing difficulties, besides issues related to condensation on spectacles. Although compliance to public health directives was clearly dominant within the analyzed sample, the particular challenges highlighted within this study also identified areas of potential breakdown of safe practices where a more focused and science-informed public health communication strategy at national level would be beneficial.

The following review article by Anilal, Calleja-Agius and Felice explores the complex interplay of protein factors in embryonic development and in the control of gene expression.

The issue concludes with a manuscript by Emad Eddin Alzoubi et al., assessing the effectiveness of different tooth whitening products, highlighting any undesirable effects of whitening on the oral soft tissues, and evaluating if tooth whitening can serve as a motivational tool for patients to improve their oral hygiene.

To conclude, I wish you all to stay strong and safe, and continue to keep up the hope for better times. As always, Xjenza Online will continue to serve the local professional scientific community, to publish high-quality original findings in a peer-reviewed environment, and to help early-career researchers to advance their scientific discourse in the community.

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