



Top Story

What was the biggest challenge to advance science in the Pandemic Year?

We sat down with a selection of iPark innovators to learn what daily life under the new normal means for them.



Rikako Yamauchi, Ph.D.

Vice President, Head of Research Unit/Frontier Sohyaku, Innovative Research Division, Mitsubishi Tanabe Pharma Corporation,

pursues innovation by utilizing new technologies and modalities, primarily focusing on genes.



Yuma Yamada, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Hokkaido University,

successfully raised double the funding goal to develop drug delivery system to deliver therapeutic agents to mitochondria.



What have been the biggest challenges in the Pandemic Year when it comes to advancing science?



[Dr. Yamauchi] We recognize that increasing burden on individuals and the risk for near-misses since **we have to conduct wet work with a very small number of members in order to meet the COVID-19 guidelines.** A limited number of our members come to the office to conduct necessary experiments but since there are quite a few things to be taken care of to keep the lab up and running, their time and attention are inevitably taken up for these chores. Also, it can be difficult for those who are not physically there, to get a sense of what is really happening and what kind of support is needed in the lab. **To stay on top of things, we need to be flexible and resourceful to make up for reduced opportunity for small everyday conversations.**



[Dr. Yamada] Virtual meetings help us maintain everyday discussions, but there are still some challenges. **One-on-one discussions for research and writing papers work well and often lead to new ideas, but detailed data-based conversations are harder. I too miss the small talk after meetings, as this is often when the initial spark for new joint research happens.**

Online and the time available for experiments is limited, so **I think clear communication before commencing experiments** is now more important than ever.



Have you experienced any changes in how you collaborate with iPark residents and members?



[Dr. Yamauchi]

Many face-to-face interactions have obviously been replaced with online channels. **In some respects, it has become easier to participate in iPark events since online attendance is possible.** There have also been **some unique initiatives at iPark** to use the shared open spaces, such as noticeboards and booths for sharing information and exchanging ideas without people being physically together.



[Dr. Yamada] I've had many opportunities to talk and share ideas with iPark residents online, such as with Axcelead Drug Partners. **Access to the iPark ecosystem is still invaluable when it comes to finding experts we can call on if we face new problems.**

We have also started to use outsourced experiments after revisiting the policy on outsourcing animal experiments and biochemical tests in line with the baseline data. At first it seemed difficult to conduct experiments if we didn't control everything ourselves, but after closed discussions with contractors, it became clear that we can incorporate them into our research process. The experience I gained here will be useful for future joint research and any commissioned research in collaboration with other companies residing in the iPark. I'm looking forward to connecting with many of the scientists at iPark through opportunities such as Science Café.



Have you noticed any mindset changes before and after this public health crisis as a scientist and biopharma leader?



[Dr. Yamauchi] I've become more aware of the need to integrate wet and dry, rather than to enhance them in a separate manner. It's important now more than ever to take small steps as we work our way through this turbulent era.



[Dr. Yamada] I used to think I was losing time whenever I had to take long trips, but now I realize how much I used that time to work on papers or mull over ideas. Humans are thinking creatures so these moments are important for research and should not be taken for granted.



Do you have any memorable quotes or words from colleagues that have kept you going during this challenging time?



[Dr. Yamauchi] “Accept things that cannot be changed,” from the book *How to Create Psychological Safety*.



[Dr. Yamada] There is a phrase I’ve cherished since I was a student: “*Pharmacy is the study of serving people.*” I feel it’s important for all research, not just pharmacology, to reach out to people, and the crowdfunding project with iPark has further strengthened this ethos.

