

## IN THE NEWS

## Physics in a time of COVID-19

The cancellation of the 2020 American Physical Society (APS) March Meeting came as a shock for many in the physics community. The decision not to go ahead with the meeting was made on Saturday 29 February — just 2 days before the start of the main programme. “Many of the 10,000 expected attendees were travelling from outside of the United States, including countries where the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a Level 3 Warning a few hours before the cancellation,” the APS explained in a [statement](#).

Within hours of the APS announcement, social media were a-buzz with reactions to the news. Along with these, the community sprang into action, posting summaries of work that would have been presented and plans for [virtual meeting sessions](#). Among the first sessions to come online were from the Division of Soft Matter (DSOFT),

spearheaded by Karen Daniels, and the Division of Biological Physics (DBIO), led by Phil Nelson. Sessions were ‘self-organized’ and run as virtual meetings using video-conferencing software. In addition, Q-CTRL sponsored the [Virtual APS March Meeting](#) platform, which mirrors the March Meeting Session Index and allows presenters to host virtual sessions or upload videos of their talks.

The APS March Meeting is not the only conference to be affected. Among others, the German Physical Society (DPG) has cancelled its Spring Meetings in Hannover and Dresden, [stating](#) that many participants had already cancelled their attendance and noting that the rapidly changing situation made the risks of going ahead “incalculable”. Meanwhile, the Rencontres des Moriond conference, which has been a premier venue for high-energy physicists to share results each year since 1966, due to be held in a resort in the Italian Alps, has cancelled its electroweak and quantum chromodynamics (QCD) sessions, owing to restrictions on public meetings introduced by the Italian government.

Beyond changes to conference plans, some physicists are facing more dramatic changes to their routines. For example, Mario Lanza, who is a professor of nanoelectronics at Soochow University in China, has been staying in Europe since

January while his students in China are all confined to their homes. This arrangement has advantages and disadvantages: the group cannot do experiments, but has time instead for detailed analysis and literature reviews. “The communication is very fluent via WeChat, even when there is no coronavirus. So, I will keep working in Spain. All I need to keep working is my computer and WiFi, but I hope this doesn’t continue [for] more than another 2 months,” says Lanza. At the European Gravitational Wave Observatory (EGO), which hosts the Virgo detector, in Cascina, Italy, visits have been cancelled and many of the personnel are working remotely, leaving only some 20 physicists and engineers on site. “On the positive side, every crisis makes us think more about the possible improvements in our operation, and we already started thinking about how to improve the automatization, which could permit the remote control of the interferometers,” said Stavros Katsanevas, director of EGO. At CERN, as of 16 March access by users and visiting scientists will be limited, with all public events cancelled. Meanwhile, many universities are switching to online classes, and physicists who teach are busy ‘translating’ their courses to a new format and using social media to share tips on problems such as how to run office hours online.

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