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Dear Readers,

Just a few months ago we published our first COVID-19 Special Issue and, prone as I am to optimism bias, back then I thought that we'd be well into the pandemic's aftermath by now. I imagined that the world would have shifted on to good news stories about vaccines and returning to 'normal' life, alongside not-so-good news stories about the detrimental socio-economic impacts in terms of rising unemployment, falling economic output, and a rising mental health crisis brought on by extended periods of lockdown, social isolation and the stress and anxiety triggered by the myriad uncertainties associated with COVID-19. There is at least some hopeful news from the last week about three vaccines nearly ready for distribution. In the race to win the COVID-19 vaccine tournament, the fact that three horses seem to be leading the race may also accelerate the final stages for other vaccines still in development. So the next policy tasks will revolve around questions about when, how, and to whom, the vaccines should be first distributed? Before those questions can be answered however, many countries are now grappling with second and third pandemics waves which, in some countries, are worse than the first waves. Enforcing public health policies is complicated by a collective weariness about all the constraints on personal liberty that the pandemic has necessitated.

In this Special Issue, we have collected together a number of papers focussing on key behavioural policy questions especially relevant in the midst of the crisis. In 'Information and symptoms assessment in community pharmacies during the COVID-19 pandemic: An audit study in Colombia' Tatiana Andia, César Mantilla, Paul Rodríguez, Leonel Criado, Juan Sebastián Gómez, Santiago Ortíz, Andrea Quintero, Ferley Rincón and Steffanny Romero present findings from study of cognitive biases in Colombian community pharmacies, showing that additional information about COVID-19 symptoms, specifically anosmia (loss of smell), increased the chances of pharmacists advising their customers to contact an emergency number and decreased the chances of pharmacists prescribing (ineffective) antibiotics.

The second and third waves of the pandemic have precipitated a wide range of government responses and in 'Compliance and Stringency Measures in Response to COVID-19: A Regional Study' Fadi Makki, Paola Schietekat Sedas, Jana Kontar, Nabil Saleh and Dario Krpan explore regional data on government enforcement and compliance collected from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker. They find that, whilst stringent measures may be more effective in the short-term, they may be counterproductive if behavioral fatigue reduces compliance over the longer-term.

Our next two papers explore some of the social and emotional consequences of the pandemic. Janette Young, Rhianna Pritchard, Carmel Nottle and Helen Banwell's paper 'Pets, touch, and COVID-19: health benefits from non-human touch through times of stress' addresses the impacts of social isolation on touch deprivation and identifies an important role for pets in boosting wellbeing and health outcomes when human-to-human contact is proscribed. In 'Prosperity and the new normal: Social distancing and the exit from lockdown', Henrietta Moore and Hannah Collins explore social distancing dimensions of lockdown policies, identifying the COVID-19 pandemic as a humanitarian crisis precipitated by the fact that the negative socio-economic ramifications of lockdown are magnified for people with precarious livelihoods. They advocate for progressive localism in the design of innovative social mechanisms designed to enhance local communities' capacities and capabilities as a constructive alternative to potentially destructive macro-led social distancing policies.

This Special Issue concludes with Valerio Capraro and H el ene Barcelo's contribution 'The effect of messaging and gender on intentions to wear a face covering to slow down COVID-19 transmission', which presents experimental results suggesting first, that messaging asking participants to focus on "your community" increased self-reported intentions to wear face-coverings; and second, that there were significant gender differences with men less likely to wear face-coverings either because they are more optimistic about resisting coronavirus or because they are more sensitive to social influences associated with wearing face coverings – for example stigma, shame and others' perceptions that wearing a face covering is a sign of weakness.

Papers for our third COVID-19 Special Issue are already in the pipeline and we will look forward to publishing those at the end of the year. And our third Special Issue is unlikely to be our last as fresh COVID-19 behavioural policy insights look set to be a standard journal feature for a few years yet to come. In the meantime, I hope that you find the following papers as informative and fascinating as I do.

MICHELLE BADDELEY
Editor in Chief
Sydney, Australia
November 2020

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