**Title:**

Drug repurposing to target COVID-19: a big data driven approach

建立用於新冠肺炎研究及藥物開發的大數據平台

**Keywords:** knowledge graph, drug repurposing, big data, pharmacy, drug interactions

**Project Duration:** 12 months

**Funding requested:** $2.5M

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Co-Is: Prof. Benjamin Cowling, Prof. Kevin CC Chang, Dr. Bo Tang

**ABSTRACT (400 words)**

**1. Impact and objectives**

**(a) Project objectives**

The objective of the proposed project is to develop an open knowledge-graph-based platform to facilitate global COVID-19 research, and to utilize the platform for discovering potential drug candidates for COVID-19 treatment.

Specifically:

1. To develop an open COVID-19 knowledge graph that will enable researchers worldwide to uncover hidden relationships between COVID-19, drugs, genes, proteins and diseases/symptoms, providing a platform for hypothesis generation to support future research on COVID-19.
2. To identify drugs and combinations of drugs that have potential to be repurposed for COVID-19 treatment using a COVID-19 knowledge graph.

**(b) Pathways to Impact Statement (should not exceed two A4 pages)**

COVID-19 has emerged as a severe global epidemic. By the end of May 2020, the number of confirmed cases worldwide had reached over 5 million. The lack of specific drug treatment for COVID-19 had contributed to more than 350,000 deaths worldwide with 100,000 deaths in the United States alone. While the situation in Hong Kong is gradually under control, the situations in Europe and America have not yet shown clear signs of improvement, and the infection is still actively spreading with more than 100,000 new cases per day worldwide. These countries are still hopeful for specific COVID-19 drug treatments to emerge, which could potentially save tens of thousands of lives globally, especially in the setting of potential viral mutation.

Unfortunately, although a number of antiviral and antimalarial agents are currently under trial for evaluating their efficacy as COVID-19 treatment, preliminary results suggest that some of these agents may not be as promising as speculated (1), whereas others are associated with serious adverse effects such as electrocardiographic changes which limits their usage.(2) Hence, effective data platform and tools are essential to enable efficient discovery of new drug candidates and drug combinations, in a search for safer alternatives.

The proposed project aims to provide a knowledge-graph-based platform and tools that will enable researchers worldwide to efficiently extract previously less intuitive linkages between COVID-19, drugs, genes, proteins and diseases. This will further facilitate efficient discovery of potential COVID-19 treatments that can be tested via clinical trials and Big Data observational studies, and subsequently be translated to clinical use.

The proposed research is expected to have local and international impacts as illustrated below.

1. **Who are the potential beneficiaries of the proposed research in the short (1-3 years), medium (4-10 years) and long term (over 10 years)?**

*Short-term*: COVID-19 patients, their family and caregivers; healthcare professionals, government, medical researchers worldwide*. Medium-term*: COVID-19 patients, their family and caregivers; healthcare system users and the society as a whole. *Long-term*: the global population, patients with chronic diseases, especially in the setting of an ageing population who are prone to infections and chronic diseases.

1. **How will the potential beneficiaries benefit? What will be the objective demonstrable/measurable benefits beyond academia?**

In the short term, hidden or less obvious linkages between COVID-19, diseases, drugs, genes, and patient demographics, can be discovered. These hidden linkages may provide insight on previously unknown relations of how sex and age, underlying diseases or concomitant medications may influence a patient’s severity or chance of COVID-19 infection. Subsequently this would shed light on ways to prevent or reduce severity of COVID-19 in specific patient populations, through randomized clinical trials, population-based studies, *in vitro* testing on cell-based platforms and animal tests. This could potentially reduce the severity of the outbreak and hasten the resumption of normal work and economic productivity, in Hong Kong as well as Europe and America where the outbreak is still not under control. Findings will also help inform treatment decisions, prioritization of healthcare resources, and design and implementation of public health policies by the government.

In the short to medium term, new treatments for COVID-19, originating from the drug candidates extracted from our knowledge graph, which have proven to have benefit may have new added indications or approved for COVID-19 treatment and made accessible to patients worldwide. As COVID-19 could potentially be a recurrent epidemic and mutations of COVID-19 in the future may render some of the repurposed drugs ineffective, availability of new COVID-19 treatment could significantly reduce mortality and morbidity due to COVID-19 worldwide, potentially saving tens of thousands of lives, particularly in older individuals with chronic health conditions.

Furthermore, the outbreak of COVID-19 and the lack of specific drug treatment has led to an unprecedented demand on healthcare system in countries worldwide. Indeed, the saturation of healthcare system capacity due to COVID-19 had also interfered with the normal course of treatment of patients with other diseases such as psychiatry and cancer. Patients with acute conditions requiring emergency treatments, such as those with acute myocardial infarction, suffered significant delays resulting in complicated in-hospital course and worse clinical outcomes. As such, availability of new COVID-19 treatment will immensely benefit not only COVID-19 patients and their caregivers, but also other patients and users of the healthcare system, as well as the society as a whole. Such benefits may be demonstrable by shortened hospital length of stay, reduction in service delays and time from symptoms to first medical contact for emergency medical conditions, as well as reduced healthcare costs due to COVID-19 and its complications.

In the long-term, the proposed project provides powerful tools and experience for knowledge-graph-based drug repurposing. These knowledge graphs, tools and techniques could be applied to any infectious disease that may emerge in the future, and allow for quick identification and testing of new treatments. This can potentially allow early control of any potential outbreak and assist in preventing large-scale public health crisis due to new viral or infectious diseases. On the other hand, these knowledge-graph based techniques could also be extended to help identify treatments for currently incurable diseases and chronic diseases as well, which could potentially reduce the economic and societal burden associated with these diseases worldwide. These benefits could be demonstrated by a shortened time to discovery of treatments for new diseases and increased number of curative treatments for previously incurable diseases and chronic diseases, as well as reduced economic and healthcare costs associated with these diseases.

1. **What will be done during and / or after the project to increase the likelihood of achieving the identified benefit and reaching the identified beneficiaries?**

During the project, we will engage closely with collaborators to share interim findings and challenges. Findings will be disseminated at international conferences and in respectable peer-reviewed journals, as well as to the general public, policy makers, and international healthcare community through press conferences, potentially reaching >50 international media sources; and media channels including newsletters, website and social media to raise public awareness on this topic.

**2. Background of research, research plan and methodology**

**(a) Background of research and expected project commencement date**

COVID-19 has emerged as a severe global epidemic, with millions of people infected and tens of thousands of deaths worldwide. Yet to date, there is no effective drug or vaccine available to treat or prevent COVID-19 and its complications. There is an urgent need for efficient tools and data platform for COVID-19 drug repurposing and research.

We propose two interlinked projects to address these unmet needs in COVID-19 research, in the setting of potential viral mutation. These projects are expected to commence by January 2021.

**(b) Research plan and methodology**

**Project 1: Building an open knowledge graph for COVID-19 research**

**Rationale:**

Knowledge graphs enable us to identify valuable information regarding the large-scale, complex relationships among different entities related to COVID-19, including drug, disease, virus, proteins and genes. Modern computational algorithms can be used to extract hidden linkages from knowledge graphs to generate useful insights and testable hypotheses. Example applications of knowledge graphs include drug repurposing, identifying potential adverse effect of drugs and disease subtyping.(3)

However, to date, there is no unified knowledge graph openly available for use in COVID-19 research. While there are recent publications on knowledge graphs linking COVID-19 publications, case statistics and genes,(4) they are generally limited in coverage and does not include essential information for drug discovery, for instance drug and protein relationships. Individual data sources are available providing information on drugs, drug-protein, gene-disease and virus-disease relationships,(5, 6) yet these data sources are all independent and have not be linked into a unified knowledge graph. A comprehensive, unified knowledge graph is needed to enable efficient extraction of high-level linkages, such as existing drugs repurposable for other diseases. These high-level linkages provide promising leads and enable faster discovery of potential treatments and unknown intrinsic characteristics of new diseases.

**Objectives:** To develop an open COVID-19 knowledge graph which will enable researchers worldwide to uncover hidden relationships between COVID-19, drugs, genes, proteins and diseases/complications, providing a big data platform for hypothesis generation and future research on COVID-19.

**Methodology:**

*Data sources*

The final COVID-19 knowledge graph will have the schema as shown in the Figure 1, covering linkages between COVID-19, drugs, genes, proteins and diseases. A variety of existing data sources will be used to build this knowledge graph, including but not limited to:

* OpenKG: OpenKG provides open knowledge graphs for specific subtopics and themes, including graphs that link existing drugs to viruses, drugs to viral proteins, viruses to diseases, viruses to viral proteins, viral proteins to host proteins, among other linkages.
* DrugBank: The DrugBank database (6) is a comprehensive, freely accessible database containing information on drugs and drug targets. It currently contains 13,575 drug entries and is widely used by industry, medical practitioners and the general public. It has enabled the discovery and repurposing of a number of existing drugs to treat rare and newly identified illnesses and serve as a source of drug-related data in this knowledge graph.
* Human phenotype ontology (HPO): HPO (5) is central in medical genetics and genomics. It provides a comprehensive bioinformatic resource for analysis of human diseases and phenotypes and serves as a computational bridge between genome biology and clinical medicine. It will be used to link disease and gene data in the knowledge graph.
* Literature: existing publications which released integrated datasets would also be incorporated, if relevant, in building the knowledge graph.

*Data processing*

**A knowledge graph is a multi-relational graph composed of entities (nodes) and relations (edges), which are triplets of facts (head entity, relation, tail entity), denoted as (h, r, t). (14) Knowledge graph provides a comprehensive means to capture, represent and formalize structured information for knowledge discovery.**

**Since there is little information about potential drug targets for COVID-19, we integrate biological pathways (genes and proteins) in which COVID-19 replicates in human cells, as well as the information on the diseases and symptoms triggered. Thus drug candidates are introduced into the knowledge graph to cut the corresponding pathways and to treat the diseases and symptoms. To align the data from different sources, we borrow the records from two groups NCBI and HPO, which provides unique identifiers for entities with different alias. Finally, a knowledge graph around COVID-19 is generated with 48K nodes of 8 labels, and 815K edges of 10 labels (i.e. Fig. 1). We plan to involve more sources to enrich the knowledge graph in the following steps.**

**Then algorithms can be developed to predicate the potential linkages between the drug candidates and the COVID-19 virus, e.g., Jaccard Coefficient, Katz Index and Rooted PageRank. (15) More generally, there are novel machine learning techniques to generate latent, low-dimensional representations of the knowledge graph called embeddings, which can then be utilized for standard downstream AI modules such as clustering, link prediction and ranking. (14)**

*Data storage*

+ Scale of graph etc

The graphs are extremely large and difficult/inefficient to process. We will investigate novel large-scale distributed learning methodologies for efficient graph processing, such as graph neural networks (GNN). The very large graphs can be stored in graph stores distributed onto multiple storage nodes, and graph processing algorithms, e.g, motif-search algorithm, are executed over multiple computing nodes while ensuring algorithm convergence and correctness.

*Data sharing*

The COVID-19 knowledge graph generated will be made available to researchers worldwide as an open data platform to facilitate global COVID-19 research.

+ federated learning / Privacy-preserving data mining / machine learning over knowledge graphs etc as relevant

**Application and impact:**

By linking a variety of scattered data sources into a unified knowledge graph, previously unexplored relationships between COVID-19, diseases, drugs, genes, and patient demographics, could be efficiently extracted. These hidden linkages may provide insight on previously unknown relations of how underlying diseases, concomitant medications or genetic profile may influence a patient’s severity or chance of COVID-19 infection. It will also allow an exploration of any potential differences among different sex or age groups such as elderly. Subsequently this would shed light on ways to prevent or reduce severity of COVID-19 in specific patient populations.

**Project 2: Graph-based drug repurposing for COVID-19 treatment**

**Rationale:**

To date, there is no specific drug or vaccine available to treat or prevent COVID-19 and its complications. As such, there is an urgent need for developing effective strategies for prevention and treatment of COVID-19. While conventional structure-based screening methods such as protein docking analyses are traditionally used for *de novo* drug discovery, repurposing of existing drugs provide a more cost and time efficient way to discover treatment for new diseases.(7)

Globally, antimalarial and antiviral agents are currently under trial for treatment of COVID-19.(8, 9) While these may have shed hope on treating COVID-19, yet from experience of other diseases, only a small proportion of new chemical entities or trialed drug candidates would succeed to show efficacy and be approved for treatment. Indeed, preliminary results from some of these trials suggest that certain candidates may not be as promising as speculated. For instance, in a randomized trial from China of 237 patients with severe COVID-19, remdesivir and placebo did not show significant difference in times to clinical improvement (median 21 versus 23 days) and mortality rates (14% versus 13%).(1) On the other hand, antimalarial and antiviral agents are generally associated with undesirable adverse effect profile and drug-drug interactions. For instance, hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine are known to prolong QTc interval. In an observational study where 84 patients received hydroxychloroquine, 10% had electrocardiographic changes which required discontinuation. (2) Hence, efficient discovery of more drug candidates, especially safer alternatives, is essential.

Currently, speculation on drug repurposing for COVID-19 treatment have largely focused on antiviral and antimalarial agents, which were known to exert antiviral effect on HIV, Ebola and other viruses, but not proven effective for SARS-CoV-2. Antiviral drug combinations, such as cocktail therapy using two or more antiviral agents, are also being explored. However, repurposing of non-antiviral agents had not been adequately explored, attributable to the less intuitive linkages between non-antiviral agents and COVID-19. Yet, it has been shown that non-antiviral agents could also influence host response to viral infections, by reducing the chance of viral entry into cells or suppressing overreaction of the immune system to the virus. For instance, Angiotensin II Receptor Blockers (ARBs) may antagonize the proinflammatory effects of angiotensin II which is increased due to COVID-19 infection.(10) Further, cardiovascular medications may improve survival as COVID-19 have been reported to have cardiovascular sequelae.(11)

Yet, with the vast number of existing drugs available, experimental approaches to find repurposable drugs would be costly and time-consuming. Structure-based virtual screening of chemical compound libraries and protein docking analyses are often used to search for new drug candidates for certain drug targets. However, such methods are limited in their ability to find candidates translatable to clinical use, since these methods search for candidates based on their chemical properties and affinity to bind specific drug targets, but do not take into account the “big picture” of complex intrinsic linkages between drugs, genes, diseases and viruses, which are important predictors of clinical efficacy. Hence, efficient computational methods that harness the wealth of big data, rather than structure-based screening alone, are essential to allow timely discovery of potential COVID-19 treatment.

**Objectives:** To identify drugs and combination of drugs that have potential to be repurposed for COVID-19 treatment using big data.

**Methodology**:

*Extraction of drug candidates from knowledge graph*

Linkages relevant to drug repurposing will be extracted from a large-scale, comprehensive COVID-19 knowledge graph generated from project 1, using motif discovery algorithms. Motifs represent frequent high-order patterns of interest in knowledge graphs. Examples of motifs relevant to drug repurposing include drug-protein-virus, virus-symptom-gene-drug and others which will be further defined and explored. Subgraphs that matches the motifs of interest will then be extracted using specific motif-clique discovery algorithms. These subgraphs will provide information on drug candidates potentially repurposable for COVID-19 treatment. Combinations of all drug classes including antiviral agents, immunosuppressants and cardiovascular medications will also be explored similarly, by extracting subgraphs where drugs of different classes share a common set of linkages to genes, proteins, disease and symptoms.

Potential linkages relevant to drug repurposing will be extracted from a large-scale, comprehensive COVID-19 knowledge graph generated from project 1, using data mining techniques. For example, motif discovery algorithms will be designed to discover frequent high-order patterns of interest in knowledge graphs (12). Examples of motifs relevant to drug repurposing include drug-protein-virus, virus-symptom-gene-drug and others which will be further defined and explored. Subgraphs that matches the motifs of interest will then be extracted using specific motif-clique discovery algorithms (13). These subgraphs will provide information on drug candidates potentially repurposable for COVID-19 treatment. Combinations of all drug classes including antiviral agents, immunosuppressants and cardiovascular medications will also be explored similarly, by extracting subgraphs where drugs of different classes share a common set of linkages to genes, proteins, diseases and symptoms.

*Evaluation and ranking of drug candidates for their clinical applicability*

The potential drug and drug combinations extracted from the knowledge graph will be further ranked through computational scoring and literature review, in order to provide a way to prioritize certain drug candidates over others in future testing on cell-based platforms or clinical trials.

+Weights that can be applied on the knowledge graph nodes/edges

+Scores or other metrics that can be computed for the drug candidates found based on the knowledge graph

Literature review will be conducted for the highest ranked drug candidates to provide evidence to rank their clinical applicability for use in COVID-19 patients, with respect to the following aspects:

1. possible underlying mechanisms of action and biological pathways involved that support their potential effect on treating COVID-19
2. potential adverse effects and safety for use, considering different population including the elderly
3. potential drug-drug interactions and drug-disease interactions, which may preclude the use of the drug candidates in patients with certain underlying diseases or taking specific concomitant medications

**Application and impact:**

Findings will reveal novel drug candidates and combinations of drugs from different drug classes that have the potential to be repurposed for COVID-19 treatment. The efficacy of these drug candidates for COVID-19 treatment can then be further validated via randomized clinical trials and multi-centre Big Data observational studies using electronic medical records, which can be translated to clinical practice and form the treatment armamentarium for COVID-19. Findings can also contribute to testing of specific drugs and drug combinations directly using cell-based platforms.

**Pilot data**

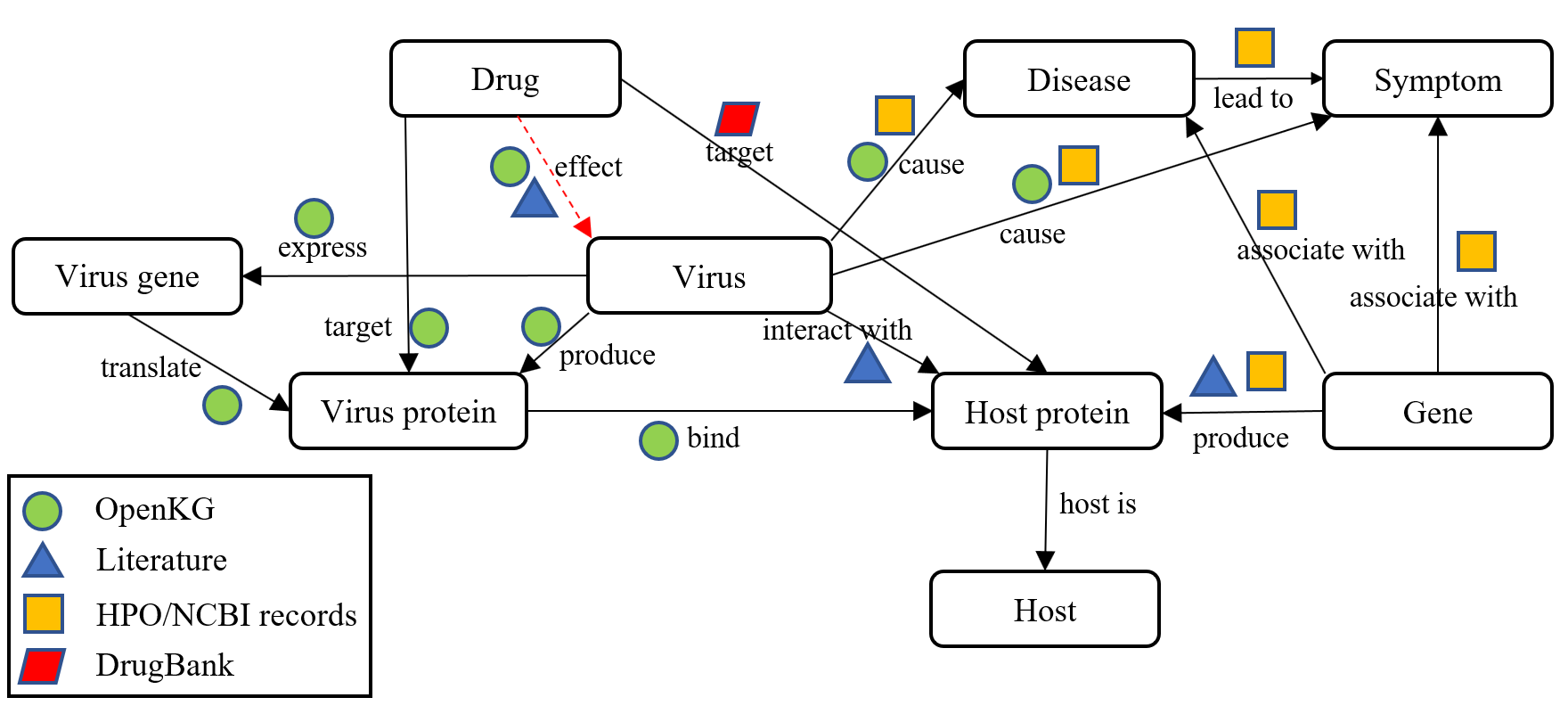
As a proof-of-concept, a small-scale knowledge graph based on data from OpenKG and DrugBank had been built. Using motif-discovery algorithms, a pilot list of 22 drugs with potential effects on COVID-19 was identified. The list included a variety of drugs from different drug classes, including vasodilators, antimicrobials, antimalarials, antivirals, immunosuppressants, coenzymes and amino acids, and trace elements. Some of these drugs are undergoing efficacy trials while others have not been explored as COVID-19 treatment currently. Based on these results, we are confident that the complete large-scale knowledge graph would allow us to uncover more drug candidates and safer alternatives which has not been explored currently but carry potential for COVID-19 treatment.

**(c) A one-page Gantt chart showing the research activities**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Activity | 2021 | | | | |
| Jan | Mar | Jun | Sep | Dec |
| Data collection |  |  |  |  |  |
| Data processing to build COVID-19 knowledge graph |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Milestone 1: 6 months from project commencement*  Completion of open COVID-19 knowledge graph |  |  |  |  |  |
| Extraction of a list of potential drug candidates for COVID-19 treatment from knowledge graph |  |  |  |  |  |
| Literature review of biological mechanisms, adverse effects and drug interactions of the drug candidates |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Milestone 2: 12 months from project commencement*  Publication of results (list of repurposable drugs for COVID-19 treatment) and submission of final report |  |  |  |  |  |
| Exploring the potential for selected drug candidates to be tested on cell-based platforms or though clinical trials |  |  |  |  |  |

**(d) Figures and tables**

**Figure 1. Sample schema of COVID-19 knowledge graph**



**(e) References**

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**7. (b) Plan(s) for collaboration in this application (max 2 pages 800 words)**

Experts from pharmacology and pharmacy, computer science, public health and medicine formed a multidisciplinary team to support this application. This collaboration combines the strengths of each discipline by applying modern data, graph and computational techniques to connect the basic sciences in pharmacy and medicine for drug repurposing, to search for potential COVID-19 treatment and provide an open platform to facilitate global collaborative research.

**Expertise in Pharmacology & Pharmacy and Big data**

The PC, Dr. Esther WY Chan is a pharmacist with expertise in medication safety and effectiveness. She has led completed multicentre randomised controlled trials in Hong Kong and Australia (ECS/RGC, NHMRC); and completed two GRF/RGC funded big data projects. She will lead and supervise the research team in all aspects of this study, including literature review, research methodology, interpretation of knowledge graph outputs in a clinical context, generation of research reports and dissemination of findings.

Co-PI, Prof. Ian CK Wong is an expert in using healthcare big data with a strong track record of leading large research programmes on medication use and safety, with success in drug repurposing for children. Together with the PC, he will refine methodology and contribute to interpretation of results and research dissemination.

**Expertise in Bioinformatics, Health informatics, Big graphs**

Co-PI, Dr Ruibang Luo, is experienced in health informatics and computational biology. His work on gene-disease associations and bioinformatic algorithms have been published in peer-reviewed journals including Nature family journals. His work involved application of deep-learning approaches to extract gene-disease associations from big data. He will advise on the use of big data information sources for building the knowledge graph and application of knowledge graph techniques for COVID-19 research and drug repurposing.

Co-PI, Dr. Chuan Wu is an expert in cloud computing and big data analytics systems / platforms. She has built large-scale distributed big data analytics/machine learning systems and published in top venues in the area. She has served as program committee members and review panels for leading database/system conferences and journals. She will assist in the implementation, storage and processing of large-scale knowledge graphs.

Co-PI, Prof. Reynold CK Cheng is an expert in data management and mining of uncertain data. He has led projects involving application of heterogeneous information networks to solve real world problems and developed efficient query algorithms for large-scale graph databases. He has served on program committees and review panels for leading database conferences and journals. He will provide database tools to build large-scale COVID-19 knowledge graph and apply computational techniques for drug repurposing and research using knowledge graphs.

**Expertise in Infectious diseases and Medicine**

Co-PI, Prof. Ivan FN Hung is a world-renowned expert in infectious diseases and a pioneer in COVID-19 drug treatment. He recently led a randomized clinical trial showing superiority of triple therapy of lopinavir/ritonavir, ribavirin and interferon beta-1b over lopinavir/ritonavir in COVID-19 patients. He will be responsible for assessing the clinical applicability of the drug candidates found from knowledge graphs and advise on the potential for selected candidates to be further validated in clinical trials.

Co-PI, Prof. David CW Siu is a leading cardiologist and stem cell biologist. His current work on COVID-19 include assessment of cardiovascular sequelae of COVID-19 patients, and disease modelling and drug screening using human induced pluripotent stem cell platform. His recent work demonstrated cytopathogenic effects of SARS-CoV-2 on human cardiomyocytes and its relationship with ACE2 expression. He will be responsible for the clinical interpretation of findings from the knowledge graph and advise on the testing of potential drug candidates using cell-based platforms.