

# Hail to Our Unsung Heroes

By Dr Bernard Lin

During the last few months, it is not difficult to notice the change in our global city costume: a face mask. People are purchasing them mostly in basic white, some black, or as some prefer, in Gucci print or Burberry plaid. But for those who prefer Louis Vuitton – I think they may have to wait. Global trotters are packing their bags with N-95 masks along with their passports, for fear of bringing back to their loved ones any “biological souvenir”.

This notorious virus, which has been compared infamously with the “Spanish Flu” in 1918 that resulted in 20 to 50 million deaths during the end of World War I, is only one of numerous epidemic hysterias that have plagued our history.

My respect goes to those who have fought previous epidemics with far fewer resources and support than what we have today. Surely, with the technology advances and wide repertoire of medical wizardry that we have currently, what happened in history previously will not be repeated. Or could it? This question cannot be answered until SARS reveals its full potential in the months to come.

From a quick search on the Internet, it will not be difficult to notice topics like China’s cover-up of her SARS epidemic problem behind her face mask (which has led to her being compared to “The Chernobyl of China”), and “SARS and Biblical Prophecy” being discussed.

One of The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Death, who rides the fourth pale horse, is currently galloping upon earth with Plague. Conquest, war and famine are rampant currently as well, albeit with less media coverage.

The World Development Indicators 2003 were released in early April with the reminder that over 8,000 children die each day from waterborne diseases that would be preventable with a clean water supply. Last week, a WHO/UNICEF press release was headlined: “Malaria is alive and well and killing more than 3,000 African children every day” – If only African statesmen could have more media coverage for their problems.

In less than 2 months since the term “SARS” was introduced to me, it has indeed taken over our news like a true virus. Previously, where there was the computer virus to worry about, now Asia economies have their own biological virus to handle. Unlike the computer virus, which can be prevented using Norton AntiVirus, this powerful microbe has evolved to outwit our human intelligence.

Although SARS is deadly, the fear of SARS is worse than the disease itself. Its impact is not so much with the disease, but the panic surrounding it. The economic costs of SARS are estimated to run into millions of dollars.

The word “globalisation” has taken on a whole new meaning. The Great SARS Tour which has taken months previously, is only taking days to weeks now. The world has literally shrunk to the size of our airplane tickets. Borders and vast oceans can no longer contain diseases. But if bricks and water cannot keep viruses away from the rest of the world, neither can they keep

doctors, researchers and administrators oceans apart, from working together to contain this disease for the common good.

The demands arising from SARS are putting our healthcare system to the test, from prevention, detection, treatment and follow-up. Frontline healthcare professionals and support staff are under extreme pressure to perform while under constant public scrutiny.

It is not surprising to see our forum filled with letters concerning SARS daily. Some are concerns, some are queries, some are encouraging, some are amusing, and others are just bored with hearing SARS being talked about everyday.

SARS has blurred the boundaries of our specialties. Infection control, preventive measures, early detection, effective treatment, and contact tracing are all crucial tasks that our government and hospitals are working on currently.

I would like to think that this invasion by SARS has brought out the best from our healthcare professionals. Hail to our unsung heroes. ■

SGH, after the SARS outbreak of 4 April 2003

## SGH, BLOCK 7

By The Hobbit

They lie in wait for you and me  
To bring the sword to us and through us:  
Indeed, to raise the One accursed.  
For irony knows no greater pathos,  
Than a beneficent healer pollinating,  
With Death each selfless breath.  
But they will not fell too many,  
Lest there be too few to live on<sup>1</sup>.

We set up many signs, gantries, barriers  
And try to salve fear with thermometers.  
But really, that is too little to stop,  
An adversary sly and numerous,  
That if just one should coax a ear cooler  
Or somehow feign a tranquil chest  
It will again scythe through many of us  
To quick fiery ends in double black bags<sup>2</sup>.

When night finally falls  
The Quad<sup>3</sup> lies numbed in its own emptiness.  
On the hill, the ivory COMB<sup>4</sup> shimmers,  
A ghost of its once preening self  
Now gazing painfully at her children,  
Shell-shocked, stricken, in medical trenches,  
Viral artillery ricocheting from death unto death  
And gives no respite even in shadows.

### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> An agent cannot kill every host if it wants to spread – the principle of attenuation in an outbreak.
- <sup>2</sup> SARS fatalities are double-bagged and cremated as soon as possible.
- <sup>3</sup> A manicured fountain garden between SGH Blocks 5 and 7, facing COMB.
- <sup>4</sup> COMB – College of Medicine Building, MOH.

### About the author:

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