

Close Encounters of the SARS Kind



Editorial note:

Although the SARS situation in Singapore is now under control, many of us feared for our lives during the height of the epidemic. Below is an account from a fellow MO whom I worked with at Changi General Hospital. She has requested to remain anonymous, and names have been changed to protect identities. I thank her for sharing her experiences with us. – **Dr Oh Jen Jen, Editorial Board Member**

I can still remember the day it all started. I had just gone post-call when my friend rang to tell me that she had been admitted to the Singapore General Hospital (SGH) with a chest infection.

She had recently returned from a shopping trip in Hong Kong, and subsequently developed a fever and persistent cough. Her condition did not improve with symptomatic treatment and she became more lethargic. Just the day before, her friend *Jane*, who had gone to Hong Kong with her, was admitted to Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) with pneumonia and transferred to the intensive care unit.

I was worried that it was the “bird flu”, which had been reported in the MOH update that I received just the week before. What luck!

I quickly made my way down to SGH to see how she was, took blood samples from her and even helped the house officer on call to do her ECG. Respiratory precautions did not cross my mind, although the thought that she might require isolation did come into question. However, the final decision whether to isolate her was to be made by the managing team. I was only there as a friend.

Little did I expect the eventual turn of events in the weeks to come. What I had initially thought was a severe form of the usual viral pneumonia turned out to be this new entity termed Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). This new catch phrase was not only going to plague the medical field but also the rest of the island and the world at large.

Having to deal with SARS was certainly a growing-up experience, both at work and on a personal level.

Fortunately, my friend was not the “super-spreader”, and a few of us thanked our lucky stars on retrospect, as none of us wore surgical masks during our visits. This is in contrast to the present practice of having to don personal protective equipment at all times during contact with patients.

Jane (the other index case) was not so fortunate. Rarely did a day pass without mention of her name and status in the media as the “super-infecter”, and details of her life were splashed across the newspapers. It is saddening that

people have forgotten to be more sensitive to the feelings of others in trying times like these.

Day after day, I prayed for my friend and *Jane*, as well as all the people I know working in TTSH who were being exposed in the line of duty. I prayed for the recovery of *Jane*’s relatives and hoped that none of my friends would be stricken with SARS.

In the meantime, containment measures were stepped up. Unfortunately, because of the unavoidable lag in contact tracing, Changi General Hospital (CGH) was also inevitably exposed to SARS. All of us were considerably worried when we had our first SARS case here – a patient whose sister was warded at TTSH and later diagnosed with the illness. Our patient had contracted the disease during one of her visits to TTSH.

But before the initial scare was over, another SARS case was identified. This time, the patient was a frequent absconder from TTSH and CGH. He had been admitted for close to a week in CGH before a link with TTSH was identified.

My fellow colleagues who were exposed to these cases were extremely worried. One had to make arrangements to stay away from home during the period of observation, for fear of spreading any infection to her family. All of us became even more uptight when my house officer developed a fever about a week after her exposure to one of the cases, and was admitted to TTSH. Thankfully, she did not come down with SARS.

I did not truly understand the loneliness of being quarantined in TTSH until I myself got admitted when I developed a fever of 39 degrees Celsius a week after my house officer fell sick. It came as a surprise, as I felt well that morning during the Sunday ward round. Myalgia developed only in the afternoon, and I had absolutely no appetite for lunch and dinner. SARS was certainly not on my mind when I walked into the CGH emergency department.

When I was informed by the nurse that I was spiking a high temperature, I had a sinking feeling that I was going to be admitted, given the contact history and imposed guidelines. I wasn’t too worried about coming down with SARS in the absence of respiratory symptoms. Rather, I was more concerned about reassuring my parents that I was going to be fine. As for myself, I was thankful that my friend happened to be on duty that evening and was there to attend to me. At least I was not alone.

The next 48 hours would have been unbearable had I not been blessed with friends whom I met along the way. Apart from the calls I received for contact tracing, I kept in touch with the outside world via my trusted mobile phone and laptop. A noisy fan installed in the room to create a relative negative pressure emitted a constant drone in the room. Hearing friendly voices and receiving SMS's kept my spirits up. The only other human contact I had was with the gowned and masked nurses who entered to take my parameters. Fortunately, my fever subsided quickly with no chest X-ray changes, and I was discharged after 48 hours of observation. My

jubilation was evident when I was told I could go home! The first thing I did was to buy a thermometer at the pharmacy because monitoring my temperature was something I would be doing for a long time to come.

Now that I am back at work, I have not become more paranoid about things. I appreciate the fact that protective equipment is available to healthcare workers to prevent any unwitting exposure to SARS, as well as the infection control guidelines that have been put in place. However, life goes on, for we will never know exactly how long SARS will be with us. And I will never forget this epidemic, having been so intimately involved with it. ■