By Dr Oh Jen Jen, Editorial Board Member

A Bug's Life

n 1995, a moderately successful Hollywood blockbuster titled Outbreak entertained a global audience with its doomsday scenario, nail-biting suspense and hearty bravado. A team of gung-ho microbiologists (many of whom double as high-ranking military personnel) race against time to contain the terrifying spread of the Motaba virus, ferried to the United States courtesy of a wild African monkey, then unwittingly unleashed on the general public through a chain of unfortunate events. As hundreds perish from a deadly haemorrhagic fever, desperation escalates at an exponential rate, culminating in a daring escape from a quarantine zone and a final confrontation which decides the outcome of a merciless manoeuvre aptly named 'Operation Clean Sweep'. Real life is rarely this exciting, but do not underestimate the possibility of a similar apocalypse in the making. The SARS outbreak in 2003 was merely a taste of what is to come.

"The single biggest threat to man's continued dominance on the planet is the virus."

- Nobel Laureate Joshua Lederberg, PhD



Avian influenza simmered quietly for almost a decade before changing strategy a year ago. Not only has it crossed over from birds to humans, it also boasts a mortality rate that consistently exceeds 40%, travels to far-flung nooks, and demonstrates a growing and extremely disturbing affinity for direct person-to-person transmission.

Ten years ago, most of us might have considered *Outbreak* the product of a screenwriter's overactive imagination.

But watching this film the other day, I was struck by its uncanny ability to mirror current events, featuring heated debates not unlike the ones we hear and read about so often in recent times. There was even a conversation concerning the 1918 Spanish flu (cue theme from *The Twilight Zone*).

SARS earned its 15 minutes of fame before receding into hibernation. H5N1 has not attained its cousin's virulence as yet, but the media is having a major field day with the myriad possibilities. Perhaps it is because we remember the lessons learnt from SARS. Perhaps an impending pandemic is just too great a story to pass up. Or perhaps all signs indicate that the new millennium will herald The Age of the Microbe. Wait, make that the *Super* Microbe.

In the past six months alone, avian flu has graced the covers of numerous high-profile magazines (including *Time* and *National Geographic*), made countless newspaper headlines and turned the spotlight on a select group of virus hunters, lab rats by definition, but now thrust to the forefront of a battle that may very well rival our two World Wars, *The Attack of the Clones* and everything we saw in *Lord of the Rings* – multiplied by a hundred.

"You have to admire its simplicity. It's a billionth our size and it's beating us."

- Outbreak



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From HIV to SARS to Ebola, each potent pathogen serves as a constant reminder of our vulnerability and limitations. We manufacture miracle drugs and orchestrate the most remarkable medical advances, but only if we are armed with sufficient (and correct) information, backed by adequate funding, and given that little extra push by Lady Luck. Where our era's major

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scourges are concerned, however, this triple combo may prove impossible to attain, with devastating consequences. Hence, *Outbreak's*



mention of 'Operation Clean Sweep' – a barbaric eradication effort which makes for good drama but, hopefully, never becomes a viable option in reality. Just as disaster flick *The Day After Tomorrow* gained significance following 2005's long list of natural calamities, *Outbreak* provides interesting food for thought.

Sometimes, one's imagination can be more prophetic than science itself. ■

Other recommendations for your viewing pleasure:

Films: And the Band Played on; 28 Days Later TV shows: House MD; Medical Investigation

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