

On the War Front

By Dr Daniel Fung, Editorial Board Member

In the last week, I have been reading with increasing alarm, about the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic as it unfolded. Ironically, the media spends more time on a war thousands of miles away than the viral warfare that is being fought on our doorstep. As a doctor, I felt really afraid, and images of the Dustin Hoffman movie “Outbreak” seemed fresh on my mind.

My wife and I discussed about whether to let our children go to school or go out to parks. Even attending a wedding dinner or a children’s birthday party became a topic for heated family debate. The schooling issue became *non sequitur* as the government (perhaps hearing our worries) decided to close schools. We went for the wedding dinner despite the fact that many of the guests were doctors, including those from the SARS hospital (I think that is the official term). We are still undecided on the children’s birthday party in the week to come, but it’s an issue to think about in the next few days. Every meeting of doctors and colleagues inevitably leads to a discussion on SARS. In the past week, most events have also been cancelled or postponed.

In my mind, a number of questions lingered over this developing problem. Why is it that Singapore and Hong Kong, 2 of the worst hit cities with SARS, have been having it so bad? The infectious disease experts will no doubt point to the close proximities that city life brings. Both Singapore and Hong Kong are small cities with large populations, with large numbers of people travelling in and out.

As a psychiatrist, I would like to suggest a few more reasons. These reasons have to do with 2 things: social and psychological.

Let’s look at social reasons first. The communities of Singapore and Hong Kong are culturally similar and largely Asian in composition. Our societies are characterised by the hardworking attitudes of its people. I have spent some time in the West and seen how people will take medical leave when they don’t feel well. They don’t have to use a medical certificate (MC), they just call in sick. No one questions their sincerity. If you are not feeling well, take it easy, rest and then come back to work.

In Singapore, we need an MC, and MC-free days are sometimes used as a key performance indicator. Doctors will work through their illness (especially if it’s a cold caused by a coronavirus) so that they don’t have to close their clinic. In hospitals, taking MC could inconvenience your colleagues and reduce your total number of patients seen (and affect your performance bonus eventually). I remember how many doctors have been lauded for not taking MC throughout their years of service as doctors.

Having 5 children, I am acutely aware of my own morbidity and I can assure you that I have a cold at least 6 times a year. But all this underlies the fact that if we work through our illness, we may well spread it to the people around us.

The second reason is the way the body reacts to infection. I am not an infectious disease expert, but even the common folk on TV will tell you that you have to boost your body’s defences (or immunity), especially to

infections that have few medicines that can directly treat it. That’s probably the basis of people rushing to take vitamins and traditional herbs that boost the body’s defence. But we mustn’t forget that stress and overwork will certainly affect the body’s immune response. In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that a stressful lifestyle characterised by lack of sleep, overwork and too many responsibilities, will lower our body’s immune system. A number of papers suggesting that chronic stress affects heart disease and cancer have been published.

When actual physical rest and relaxation is impossible, the encouragement and support of the greater community is needed. I know how it feels to be ostracised because just this morning, a 10-year-old boy walked into our clinic (a mental health facility) with an N95 mask firmly strapped over his mouth. The mother apologised but told me that she was afraid that I might be infectious because I am a doctor. It is such views that dishearten the already stressed, increasing their vulnerability to illness.

In Singapore, the combination of a highly stressed lifestyle and the stoic nature of our communities, places us uniquely vulnerable to the ravages of SARS. If there is a lesson to be learned, this does remind us that we should take time to relax, recharge and hopefully return to work after a bout of sickness.

At the same time, I cannot but feel the greatest admiration for our brave colleagues who trudge on at the war front (i.e. Tan Tock Seng Hospital). Let us all stand united in applauding their selflessness that makes us all proud to be a brotherhood (and sisterhood) of doctors. ■