

# Courage Under Fire

By Dr Oh Jen Jen, Editorial Board Member

## Editorial note

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It's the stuff bestselling novels and blockbuster movies are made of. A mysterious virus sweeps through Asia, aided by commercial air travel and urban conditions, striking young and old alike, and causing a significant number of deaths. But unlike the bird flu and mad cow disease, which were addressed through a widespread slaughter of chickens and bovines, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) is transmitted through close human contact, caused by a virulent pathogen and, worst of all, has no known effective treatment.

Not since the hand, foot and mouth disease outbreak in 2000-2001 has Singapore been gripped with fear of such gigantic proportions, prompting authorities to invoke the Infectious Disease Act, impose home quarantines and close schools all over the country in a bid to contain further spread.

When I learnt that SARS was becoming a serious epidemic and that cases were all being directed to Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) and the Communicable Disease Centre (CDC), I couldn't help feeling relieved that I hadn't gotten my top MOPEX choice after all (i.e. TTSH General Medicine). However, relief quickly turned to shock and concern when the media revealed that Dr Leong Hoe Nam and his wife had SARS. I first met Dr Leong at Alexandra Hospital, when he was a houseman and I was a student rotating through internal medicine, and remember his warmth and generosity – although he was often busy, which is the norm for all medical housemen, he regularly gave us excellent tutorials. Many of my friends and colleagues also know him, either directly or indirectly, and many took an active interest in both his and his wife's progress. Thankfully,

Dr Leong and his wife have recovered and returned home.

Others were not as lucky. Dr Ong Hok Su, a cardiology medical officer at TTSH, contracted SARS while caring for a patient who subsequently perished from the disease. Though young and healthy, he became seriously ill and required intensive care. At one point, he improved and was moved to an isolation ward. However, he suddenly collapsed thereafter, necessitating transfer back to the ICU. This time, he did not recover. Neither did Dr Ong's mother, also a doctor, who was critically ill with SARS in the ICU. Our prayers are with Dr Ong's family during this immensely difficult period.

A significant number of medical personnel came down with SARS during the course of their work, and with such alarming statistics, doing our jobs has become a major health hazard – I would even call it a "life hazard". Unlike most victims, who inadvertently get infected through travel or contact with relatives and friends, doctors and nurses willingly thrust themselves into the fray on a daily basis, especially at hotspots like TTSH and the CDC. But they're not thrill-seekers on an adrenaline rush, throwing themselves off cliffs and airplanes for the fun of it. These are unbelievably brave and dedicated people who have risen to the occasion and shown the world what Singapore's healthcare professionals are made of. A friend of mine was temporarily deployed to the CDC during the manpower shortage, and has this to say about what he witnessed, "Exhaustion definitely ruled the day but their sheer determination to do their jobs well must be given due credit. They are indeed the true heroes of this event."

In the midst of such chaos and danger, it is indeed inspiring to see selflessness and temerity on glorious

display. A good friend of mine was recruited to help cover the SARS wards recently, and though apprehensive, especially since she has a young daughter, she took it in her stride and fulfilled her new duties. When asked why she didn't just resign instead – unlike many of us local graduates, she studied overseas and isn't bonded – she answered, "I knew there may come a time when I'd have to risk my life for my career. Perhaps I happened to be in TTSH for a reason. And with other doctors succumbing to SARS, someone has to take care of the patients." On a lighter note, she added, "Besides, medical history is being made! How often do we get any real action here? We're fighting our own little war, we're discovering new things everyday – and we get to wear space suits!"

When TTSH closed its doors to new admissions, cases flocked to Changi General Hospital (where I'm currently posted). And with a significant number of them having stayed in TTSH sometime in the past month, we took the initiative of donning gloves and N95 masks when seeing any new patient. A "fever ward" was also set up, run by a small team of plucky doctors and nurses. However, CGH's "SARS-free" tag didn't stick for long, as 2 staff nurses here were diagnosed with the condition on 7 April. This unexpected turn of events has changed the overall mood drastically, with a marked increase in general anxiety. I didn't really worry about SARS very much, until now, and when people ask me if I'm scared, I tell them, "Of course I am." We're all frightened, but that doesn't mean we should stay home and abandon our responsibilities. That's not what being a doctor is about.

In addition to excellent job attitudes, I also applaud how the medical community here has banded together to ensure that good healthcare

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may continue. Special mention goes to the A&E departments, which have been working round the clock, sometimes in 12-hour shifts. Information on SARS is shared and disseminated on a daily basis, and some resourceful physicians have even produced a serum that may help infected patients fight the disease more effectively.

On 29 March 2003, Dr Carlo Urbani, the Italian epidemiologist who first discovered SARS, died from the illness, after treating infected patients in Hanoi, Vietnam. Credited with alerting the world of this new entity and helping to heighten

global surveillance and diagnosis of the disease, Dr Urbani was highly commended by WHO director-general Gro Harlem Brundtland, who said, "His life reminds us again of our true work in public health."

Bernard Shaw once said, "There is always danger for those who are afraid of it." Yet, in these perilous times, thousands of doctors and nurses all over the world follow in Dr Urbani's footsteps, willingly risking their own lives for the sake of saving others. It is an astounding testament to the strength of the human spirit when faced with such staggering odds, and best of all, it is happening right here in Singapore.

Early this month, there was a sudden surge in the number of local healthcare workers affected by SARS, many a direct result of infection at the workplace. One promising young doctor's life has already been lost, and a nurse and 2 other doctors are now in intensive care. One can only hope that there will be no other additions to the death toll. Any further sacrifices in the line of duty will be truly devastating.

In a news conference broadcast on 7 April, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong called doctors and nurses here "valiant people". We salute all medical personnel who remain undaunted in the war against SARS. You are a wonderful inspiration to us all. ■