

A Nation At War

By Dr Tan Poh Kiang

A common enemy brings together a nation with a fortified resolve to overcome it.

Unlike Gulf War I when its news had dominated the front pages of The Straits Times, Gulf War II has had to share front page space with a local war against the lethal coronavirus. You know that it is a national crisis when 60,000 children are told to stay home and the Infectious Disease Act is invoked to quarantine hundreds of individuals. Playgrounds, coffee shops and shopping malls are missing their usual patrons. Taxis queue in vain to pick up commuters. When masks are snapped up faster than the hitherto popular BeyBlades, it is not difficult to diagnose that we are right in the midst of a national crisis.

Over the last few days, I have had to answer endless FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) to manage the raging fear factor sweeping through the community. As part of the concerted efforts to stem the spread of SARS, I have tried to turn off my newly

installed air-conditioner, blast the fans, and keep the doors and windows open to improve ventilation. My staff and I have put on the ubiquitous N95 masks and issued surgical masks to patients waiting to see me. The clinic reeks of disinfectant instead of potpourri fragrance. We wash hands so often that we have to use lots of emollient to counter the consequent dryness. Universal precaution has made general practice more inconvenient than it has ever been.

That is not to say that I mind it at all. I share Sumiko Tan's sentiments in her Life Section (30 March 2003, The Straits Times) "Why Nic Robertson's my hero", in which she expressed that in comparison to the war correspondents reporting in Iraq, her work pales in significance. She questioned, "When I read about these journalists, I wonder: what am I doing here and not there?"

Many of my medical colleagues are staring at death through the visor of

a PAPR. These nurses and doctors provide life-sustaining care for the critically ill SARS victims in the confines of Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) and the Communicable Disease Centre (CDC), while risking their own lives. Despite the real danger, the CEO of TTSH, Dr Lim Suet Wun reported that only 2 staff members had resigned in March. When asked if TTSH will ever shake off its "SARS hospital" tag, his answer was inspiring, "This hospital wears that badge with pride. Somebody has to do it. We have been designated and entrusted to do it. We will do it to the best of our abilities because at the end of the day, patient care is what the hospital was founded for and we will see that through."

It is during such a time that I am acutely aware of the ennoblement that comes with the medical profession, and thus feel proud to be a member of this community. The Ministry of



About the author:
Dr Tan Poh Kiang (MBBS, 1990) is a member of a band of community doctors who are privileged to serve among the folks in the HDB heartland. Correspondence can be directed to liejoan@singnet.com.sg

Health (MOH) staff are working endlessly to keep the information flowing to the public and the medical practitioners. The Singapore Medical Association (SMA) is administering the sale of N95 masks and have set up a SARS Relief Fund (which has since merged with The Courage Fund). The College of Family Physicians Singapore (CFPS) has printed posters and distributed them to clinics with the voluntary help of Quest Laboratories Pte Ltd. A common enemy brings together a nation with a fortified resolve to overcome it.

Times of high anxiety always cause affected individuals to express

their concern in negative and critical ways. There are those who have criticised the MOH and TTSH for not instituting stringent measures early enough to prevent the staff from getting infected. Parents demand for schools to be closed even before the Ministry of Education (MOE) did, and then other parents demand for them to be opened. Many were upset to discover that there was a SARS patient who eventually died in the National University Hospital (NUH).

Dealing with a relatively unknown virus means that new and often radical decisions are made in stages as the collective understanding

increases. Resources are stretched, and physical and mental fatigue affect all the personnel involved in the ongoing battle. Rather than wallow in pessimism, it is now that we have to harness our words of affirmation to accentuate the positive, to encourage our wearied warriors, and to soothe frayed nerves so that life can continue as normal as possible.

The war will end – both in Iraq and here. We pray that the cost of war viz. the casualty numbers, are low. What is important is that we remember and appreciate our war heroes and we learn sufficiently to prevent the next one. ■