

SARS of “The Plague”

By A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean

I read books by the French existentialistic writer, Albert Camus, like “Myth of Sisyphus” and “The Fall”, during my youth. Somehow, I never got to his classic novel, “The Plague”, written in 1946, until now. Was it the morbid title? Or did I think the subject anachronistic in the brave new world of medicine that I was embarking on?

In the midst of the recent SARS outbreak, a French patient of mine commended the book to me. He probably wanted to give his doctor, across the barriers of mask, gown, gloves and gloom, another perspective of “Le Peste” by his compatriot.

The protagonist, *Dr Bernard Reieux*, painted the human landscape of Oran in the first chapter. *“Perhaps the easiest way of making the town’s acquaintance is to ascertain how the people in it work, how they love and how they die. In our little town, all three are done on much the same lines... The truth is that everyone is bored and devotes himself to cultivate habits... Our citizens work hard but sorely with the objective of getting rich. I see no need to dwell on the manner of loving in our town. The men and women consume each other rapidly in what is called ‘the act of love’ or else settle down to a mild conjugality. At Oran as elsewhere, for lack of time and thinking, people have to love each other without knowing much about it.”*

Elsewhere, as in Singapore, end February 2003, a pestilence was to suddenly confound the ordinariness and routine of our lives. Great novelists have uncanny insights into the human condition. Otherwise, they should be proclaimed prophets. As it was for the plague in Oran, so it is for SARS in Singapore. The novel is however, neither just of gloom and doom, nor is this review.

Oran was shut out from the outside world for ten months. Forced to abandon their ordinary habits and finding themselves trapped by dire circumstances, Oran’s inhabitants had to confront their inner selves and each other. Indeed, the novel’s characters formed a dynamic tableau of man imprisoned.

When the plague began, *Father Paneloux preached*, *“The just man need have no fear, but the evil-doer has good cause to tremble. The same pestilence which is slaying you works for your good and points your path.”* When the priest himself was infected, *Reieux* was not sure how to diagnose it. And when *Father Paneloux* succumbed, *Reieux* recorded against the deceased’s name in the index card: *“Doubtful case”*. I still have doubts as to why in the recent SARS outbreak, the pastor and two of our finest colleagues must die.

Rambert, the Parisian journalist who was stranded while on assignment in Oran, desperately tried to escape the quarantined city, but later decided to share the common destiny of its inhabitants. In Singapore, some doctors could not initially identify the SARS outbreak as theirs to fight. But the fault lines held in spite of the increasing professional divisiveness brought on by corporatisation. Doctors as a profession, rallied strongly across clusters and affiliations.

The street-smart *Cottard* thrived by pandering to fears and vulnerabilities. Smuggling bootleg luxuries across quarantine lines and arranging escape from the city, he rationalised his wheedling and dealing as “public service”. The Cottards of Singapore also fed the rumour mills during the SARS outbreak and then astutely issued pious supplications to refute these rumours. I remember a doctor who championed the use of new age immune-boosters at one of the doctors’ meetings. I hope he did it only at that medical forum, and not to his patients. From anti-oxidants and cultured milk, to traditional remedies, there was no lack of news of panacea in the media at the height of the outbreak.

Camus did not portray *Dr Bernard Reieux’s* resistance against the plague in heroic light. *“None the less, he knows that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could be the record of what had had to be done and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences strive their utmost to be healers.”* The local press had on past occasions, labelled doctors with unkind names, but now, hailing us as heroes is the flavour of the day.

Camus concluded the book on a note now drummed into doctors ad nauseum: *“Be resolute and vigilant.” “And indeed as he listened to the cries of joy arising from the town (when the plague finally broke), Reieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not but could have learnt from books: That the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can be dormant for years and years... and that perhaps the day would come when, for bane and the enlightenment of men, it rouse up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a happy city.”* ■

Note:

Albert Camus’ *The Plague* first published 1947; English translation by Penguin Books 1960; 297 pages; £5.99.



About the author:

A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean is the past SMA-News Editor and a past SMA President. In the recent SARS outbreak, he headed a SARS workgroup from the College of Family Physicians to provide information and advice to doctors practising in the community. He first alluded to this book in the live CME interactive webcast on SARS organised by the College and held on 25 May 2003.