

Wanted in Hong Kong: WHO inspectors

By David Lan, Former SHA, Vice-Convenor of New Century Forum (18-04-2003)

On 11th April, HKSAR government announced that it would soon require all passengers leaving Chap Lap Kok to have their body temperature checked before boarding the plane. Those who have found to have a fever will be examined immediately by doctors who would conduct further checks (including X rays) on other symptoms to determine whether they have the Sars disease. This is a decisive attempt by government to reassure people and governments overseas that "Hong Kong will do its best to prevent the spread" of atypical pneumonia and "there should be no worry about people from Hong Kong spreading the disease".

On 13th April, after having overcome all legal and technical problems, government published the full list of 169 blocks of buildings occupied by an infected person(s) with sufficient details on addresses and locations so that people can take precautions, if considered necessary.

On 10th April, government ordered the immediate 10-day home quarantining of some 150 from 70 households (at different locations) who had been in close contact with Sars patients.

When government announced on 27th March the closing of schools and kindergartens and the quarantining of households at Block E of Amoy Gardens on 31st March, there were a lot of complaints from all sectors including some local politicians that government's actions were either too slow (compared to Singapore) or too abrupt because there was no fore-warning. However, with the mandatory moving on 2nd April of all affected residents at Block E of Amoy Gardens to the two holiday camps during the quarantining period, together with a series of bold actions that followed including those mentioned earlier, people's attention became more focussed and there have been less noises made. Hong Kong people are no fools, they expected and can now feel that government is taking the lead in working out proper strategies and planning on a series of bold actions to steer Hong Kong out of deep waters.

Let us face the reality. A little over a month since the first Sars case was discovered on 3rd March, small Hong Kong with 6.7 m people now has 1232 confirmed cases, over 1/3 of the world's 3300 cases and 56 deaths, more than 1/3 of the world's total 132 deaths. Although airborne transmission has been ruled out, we still do not know exactly how many ways the disease can be transmitted, but it does spread quickly and



easily for some people including some overseas visitors as well as frontline medical staff; even not so frontline medical experts like Dr. S.W. Ho and Dr. Fung Hong could still catch it. We do not know how many types of viruses cause the disease and the quick test to determine whether someone has caught the disease is not so reliable, we were told. Hong Kong people are certainly unhappy, nervous and seemingly helpless. An April fool joke by a 14-year-old child about possible closing of borders resulted in a panic rush to purchase rice and toilet papers at supermarkets. Any sudden unknown development connected with the Sars episode could trigger off unnecessary panics.

Sars has dealt a serious blow on Hong Kong's economy. Tourism which has been Hong Kong's bright spot because of increased inbound business from the Mainland, is down (80-90)%. Hotel occupancy is down to below 20%, restaurant patronage dropped between 50-90% with revenue down by 70-80%. Retail sales have also dropped by over 50% in terms of business volume. Hong Kong's flagship, Cathay Pacific Airways, is now cutting its daily flight by 37% and could not rule out grounding its entire fleet should the total daily passenger number drops below the 6,000 mark. At the international level, things do not look good either. Switzerland banned Hong Kong exhibitors in a major jewelry and watch fair opened on 3rd April in Basel and Zurich. WHO issued an advise on 2nd April warning travellers to avoid Hong Kong. Malaysia (though temporarily suspended the action) and Panama ban ordinary visitors from Hong Kong and other countries or regions with Sars cases to enter the two countries.

At this point in time Hong Kong seems to be in troubled waters all round. I hate to say it, but Sars is providing HKSAR government a good opportunity to exercise effective and strong leadership in pulling together all the resources from the HK community irrespective of their different cultures, beliefs or political backgrounds, so that the entire HKSAR with its 6.7 million population could all work together as a cohesive society to fight against one common enemy -the Sars and win the battle soon. With the bold actions taken as mentioned earlier, government is already on the right track. But more needs to be done and I offer three additional viewpoints for government's consideration:

- i. When finding the right solution for the Sars problem, do not limit the target towards the talents and resources in the public sector and the universities only. Open the gate wider to include the private and the alternative medical sectors as well. On TV it was reported that Guangdong (which takes up a part of 1418 cases in China) have shown better results because they also rely on Chinese herbalist treatment in addition to traditional western medicine. Could this not be looked at seriously by government?

Another example, a member of New Century Forum, Prof. Albert Cheung-Hoi Yu is developing a sensitive, fast and accurate detection method for Sars disease by using DNA technology. Government should provide necessary support to try out this new method.

ii. Should we not, as a matter of great urgency, invite WHO to send a whole team of experts to Hong Kong to do what they did in Guangdong? After leaving Guangdong, the WHO's team is now looking at Beijing and later Shanghai. Hong Kong is always proud of being an open society, we can only gain with the proposed visit by WHO. Despite our small size, over one third of the world's total number of cases is on our plate and we are still having some 40 new cases (25% of whom being frontline medical staff) daily and 9 deaths on one day at least. We need all the help we can get to fight this new unknown disease.

iii. Almost from day one onwards, we noticed that from frontline professional and medical staff, especially those working in intensive care units, are exposed to great risks. From recent figures released daily, some 25% of all new cases belong to frontline medical staff. This is frightening and very worrying. Does that mean that we lack resources and expertise to prevent our frontline people from being contaminated when fighting this war? An effective solution must be found at all cost.

iv. Let us not waste too much time to combat the "super-sensitivity or over-reaction" of governments and friends overseas. All resources available should be concentrated towards battling the Sars disease here in co-operation with Guangdong and other neighbours. Facts speak loudly for themselves in an open society. Government's information released daily should not forget the international angle, as the whole world is watching us very closely. Also, government should now mobilize the district councils, area committees, mutual aid committees, as well as all groups and organizations in the NGO sector and at the district level, who are willing to join in a co-ordinated effort to pull their resources together to fight against this battle of the century.

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