

## Flu Kills 36000 Americans Every Year

David Lan ( 26-04-2003 )

It is really very tough right now for Hong Kong which has already been hit by high unemployment rate of over 7%, economic slowdown coupled with deflation and also with many home owners suffering negative asset value, to be attacked by the sudden outbreak of the atypical pneumonia, not to mention of the negative effect on Hong Kong brought about by the war in Iraq. This Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (Sars) is taking its toll on Hong Kong's morale and the economy. It has placed the HKSAR in a crisis situation in the eyes of the whole world, with over 1200 confirmed cases and another over 1000 people who have had close contacts with confirmed patients placed under daily observation (since 10th Oct-virtually house-arrest) or staying in closed campus. We still see a daily increase of some 40 or more new cases (although tailed off from a daily peak of 80), while many medical personnels, including the CE of Hospital Authority, Dr. Ho Siu Wai and Dr. Fung Hong, CE of Prince of Wales Hospital were being hospitalized with Sars infection.

Tourism is among the very obvious hard hit industry today. Tourists from Europe and US were already falling in the past years but Hong Kong was happy to see a rapid picking up in recent years with tourism from mainland China. However, this plummeted since March with inbound tourism down 80-90% and now virtually at a standstill. Hotel occupancy is down to about 20% (five star hotels have single digit occupancy rate), restaurant patronage dropped between 50-90% with revenue down by 70-80%. According to Census and Statistics Department figures, retail sales already dropped 12.4% by value from a year earlier to HK\$12.7 billion, have recently dropped further by over 50% in terms of total business volume.

Cathay Pacific Airways, one of the most profitable airline in the world, 5 weeks after announcing a record HK\$3.98 billion net profit, faces an immediate 23% cut in flights and already risen to beyond 1/3-claims that it faces the greatest crisis in 26 years. The future is dismal, as it could not rule out grounding its entire fleet should the total daily passenger number falls below the 6,000 mark. Some airlines, Northwest for example, are simply avoiding Hong Kong altogether.

Switzerland banned Hong Kong exhibitors from participating in a major jewelry and watch fair opened on 3rd April in Basel and Zurich, whilst US and many European countries have advised their citizens to postpone traveling to Hong Kong and Asian cities, unless absolutely necessary. On 2nd April, WHO issued an advice warning



travellers to avoid Hong Kong. Malaysia is the first country that denies Hong Kong from visa-free entry together with other countries and regions hit by the outbreak including the mainland, Vietnam, Canada and Taiwan. Panama also bans visitors from Hong Kong.

True, Hong Kong is not in good shape at present, and we cannot see any light yet at the end of the tunnel, but now is the time for Hong Kong people to work together to show their steel in fighting against this battle. Let me put forward my views for consideration by all concerned, including the SAR government.

First of all, it is important that Hong Kong people should keep our calm, no matter what happens. Rumour by a 14-year-old kid on 1st April that the borders were about to be closed triggered a panic rush to stock up rice, toilet papers and what not. We also see on TV people losing their cool when confirmed cases are found in their neighbourhood. Since the first case was found in early March, we now have 1268 confirmed cases and 61 deaths - over 3% of those infected - we were told that the death rate for ordinary pneumonia is much higher. According to a recent edition of Business Week magazine, ordinary flu still kills some 36,000 Americans every year, while Malaria and Tuberculosis each kills 2 million people a year around the world. Sars could be a deadly disease, but let us face this serious problem in its proper perspective. Furthermore, with proper precaution and treatment, the full recovery rate for Sars Patients is very high.

Secondly, we are now fighting a new illness Sars that has caused great alarm and concern of the whole world. Small Hong Kong takes up about 1/3 of both the total worldwide Sars cases and total deaths. We should urgently invite WHO (which has warned travellers to avoid Hong Kong) to send a whole team of experts to Hong Kong just like what they did in Guangdong. We are dealing with an entirely new disease that spreads rather quickly and there are still so many unknown factors. As a very open society Hong Kong can only gain with the proposed visit. After Guangdong, WHO's team has been invited and is already doing similar checks in Beijing and Shanghai.

Thirdly, from day one onwards we have heard complaints about HKSAR government being too slow in doing everything, including the closing down of schools. Whilst we can air our grievances loudly, let all citizens in Hong Kong work closely together with government as a cohesive society, because much strength is needed to fight this battle on the medical, social, economic and external relationship fronts. The society as a whole fully appreciates the dedication and great contributions made by the frontline

medical staff and also the rather effective actions taken at Block E of Amoy Gardens. We also noticed that government is responding effectively on a daily basis in facing the quickly changing new situations. On 10th April we saw government announcing the 10 day home quarantining scheme. Two days later government pushed out the proposed scheme for all passengers leaving HK to have their body temperature checked before boarding an airplane. The Hong Kong community fully supports the HKSAR government exhibiting strong leadership with bold actions to steer Hong Kong out of the woods.

Fourthly, what is causing great anxiety in the Sars is there are so many unknown factors-types of viruses causing this illness, exactly how is the illness transmitted-why are so many well-trained medical staff including Dr. S.W. Ho and Dr. Fung Hong being contaminated? Is the method of testing the disease quickly a reliable one? When finding the right solutions for this problem, government should not limit targeting only the talent as well as the resources in the public sector and the universities, but should include the private and the alternative medical sectors as well.

To give an 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. Also, from media reports, Guangdong seems to be successful in using herbalist treatment in addition to traditional western medicine when fighting the Sars battle. This should also be looked at.

Fifthly, 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.

It is very unfortunate that Hong Kong is hit badly by the Sars disease which has placed all of us in a real crisis situation. Once again, I am pleading loudly that now is the time for all citizens of Hong Kong, irrespective of their cultures, beliefs, ethnic or political backgrounds, to exhibit the traditional Hong Kong spirit and to work together with the HKSAR government which should take a strong lead with great determination in fighting this battle, with a view to definitely winning it soon. Government should also mobilize all the district councils, area committees, mutual aid committees as well as all groups, organizations in the non-government sector and



at the district level in fighting this battle of the century.

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