

Editorial

Lessons learned from the SARS epidemic in Taiwan

ERICK T-T SUEN

Editor-in-Chief

Now is the time we should review the occurrence of a SARS epidemic in Taiwan. There are many unanswered questions related to this epidemic that remain to be solved. The medical and science communities, as well as the government health offices, continue to work day and night to fight this epidemic and to understand the transmission of this deadly emerging infectious disease. The lessons we learn today may have a profound impact on our ability to prevent the outbreaks of tomorrow.

The community and the media in Taiwan have been highly alert regarding SARS transmission in this difficult time. Several doctors and nurses in Taiwan have been the casualties of this outbreak. On April 30, 2003 President Chen Sui-Bien declared all out war on SARS, indicating that the government sees this not only as an important public health issue, but as a direct threat to the society and national security of Taiwan. The exchange of travelers between Taiwan, China and Hong Kong, makes the potential for re-introduction of SARS to the population of Taiwan a continuing possibility. When will it be over?? How far will it go?? Nobody knows at this point.

There are lessons to be learned from the partnerships between basic sciences research, clinical medicine, and public health. An international community of scientists worked together to publish the RNA sequence of the SARS virus within 2 weeks of the recognition of the outbreak. This is astonishing. Preliminary clinical findings were published in the *Lancet* by Peiris *et al.** with early publication granted to the WHO website. This is also unprecedented. In May 2003, two scientific teams of investigation on SARS outbreak were sent from WHO and from US CDC to Taiwan. We appreciate their kind assistance. A scientific research team was formed in Taiwan on May 5 by the Nobel Laureate Dr. Lee, Yuan-Tseh, who indicated that we would work together to create synergy and to produce results in therapeutics, diagnostics and in preventives against SARS. The budget allocated to combat this disease is estimated about \$50 billion NT. Seven research subcommittees were set up to do research on Virology, Immunology, Diagnostics, Drug development, Vaccine, Clinical Research and Epidemiology. Collaboration and team work among members of the global community will remain essential to our success. In the mean time, we need to continue to mobilize resources in this country to support these important endeavors. Lessons in the past have taught us that we must act quickly, cohesively and intelligently to win this race against an emerging virus.

In the editorial section of *Science* published in May, Dr. B. H. Bloom says "Infectious diseases do not respect national boundaries." He urged the United States to "create a true global health network" by investing in strengthening the health infrastructures in countries around the world. We certainly believe that Taiwan can be among the leaders in the global community in the fight against SARS. And the lessons we learn may help prevent the outbreaks of other disease in the future.

* Peiris, J. S. M. *et al.*. Prospective study of the clinical progression and viral load of SARS associated coronavirus pneumonia in a community outbreak. May 1. WHO website. <http://www.who.int/csr/sars/prospectivestudy/en/>