BOOK REVIEW

SARS: How a global epidemic was stopped, by WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific, Geneva, World Health Organisation, 2006, 307 pp., including notes, US$36.00/Swf40.00 (Price for developing countries US$18.00/Swf20.00) (paperback), ISBN 9-290-61213-4

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) was the first global epidemic of the twenty-first century. This timely book is an intriguing post-mortem examination of how the risk arose and how we responded to it. There are chapters concerned with the science of SARS that are informative and well written, however, the most compelling reading addresses the chronology of the epidemic, its impact on communities and their responses to the challenge of an emerging infectious disease. The tale has heroes and villains. The former outnumber the latter. Physicians, nurses and other medical staff put themselves in harm’s way at every clinical site; the death toll of health care workers was higher than for any other group. Two named heroes are Carlos Urbani, who brought SARS to the attention of the world and gave his life in service of its containment, and Aileen Plant, who directed epidemiological research and control efforts in Viet Nam and provided international leadership in coordinating the global response. A third was John La Montagne, unsung in this book, but nonetheless a critical voice in emphasising the importance of investing in infrastructure for international respiratory disease surveillance and research. Although there are others, I cite these three because they were active in the public health response to SARS and either died of infection during the course of the outbreak (Urbani) or later in the course of duty while travelling to address the threat of pandemic influenza (Plant and La Montagne). The villains are those who withheld information that might have facilitated earlier recognition and containment. The process by which the causative agent was identified by international teams is rightfully heralded as an unprecedented example in sharing of data and samples. I would like to write that this success has ushered in a new era of global cooperation; however, the public health community is still struggling to obtain access to viral strains and sequences that are key to addressing the challenges of pandemic influenza.

Readers unfamiliar with intimate details of the history of the outbreak can find surprises here. One is that Chinese scientists discovered the SARS coronavirus in February 2003. This did not come to light because a senior investigator favoured a different agent and suppressed the work. Another was the implication of a paramyxovirus prior to implication of the SARS coronavirus. These missteps highlight what can go wrong scientifically and politically in outbreak investigations even when sharp minds and technologies are focused on a common objective. An irony that became apparent as the epidemic unfolded was that more advanced hospital facilities posed greater risk to patients and staff because aggressive
pulmonary hygiene favoured virus transmission. In the end, controlling the epidemic
turned not on state-of-the-art diagnostics, medications or vaccines, but rather on
classical gumshoe epidemiology, contact tracing and isolation. Readers may also be
surprised to learn that important phenomena remain poorly understood, such as the
identity of the original animal reservoir of the virus, why some infected individuals
became super spreaders or how the agent disseminated in the Amoy Gardens
apartment complex or the Metropole Hotel in Hong Kong.

What are the take home lessons from this book? We truly live in a global
community. Infectious diseases do not respect international boundaries, social class or
even host species. The One Health movement, which proposes to integrate human and
non-human animal health to address the challenges of zoonotic diseases, was fuelled in
part by the SARS outbreak. It is beyond the scope of this review to discuss the role of
carnivorous diets in human disease; nonetheless, live animal markets, particularly
those that mingle domesticated animals and wildlife, pose a significant risk to global
health.

W. Ian Lipkin
*Columbia University, New York, USA*
wil2001@columbia.edu
© 2009, W. Ian Lipkin