

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

ONE FLU OVER THE CITY THAT DOESN'T SLEEP

25 May 2009 – I arrived on a muggy Memorial Day Monday in New York City (NYC) via a quite empty SQ flight from Singapore, and then a multiculturally jam-packed train from Newark Airport to downtown Penn Station. This was a day after Singapore's Patient Zero, later confirmed to have Influenza A (H1N1), had just left NYC on a previous SQ flight. The hot local news as I checked in at my dinky hotel near the medical centre hub in the Upper East Side was that a bomb had gone off that same morning at a Starbucks there. The number of confirmed H1N1 cases in NYC then was over 300 cases with two deaths. The cluster was mainly in Queens and in schools.

At the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center where I had a fruitful seven hours' worth of meetings, there was no thermal scanner screening, no temperature checks, no documentation of travel history, no healthcare workers or patients wearing masks, and no questionnaire asking me if I had a fever or cough, or whether I was a terrorist or carrying a bomb under my jacket. Having said that, Vice President Joe Biden did initially sound out Americans to reduce air travel and avoid subways when the H1N1 first hit the shores of the Land of the Free. By the time I arrived in NYC, the fear had receded even though the United States had the highest number of confirmed cases in the world, as most cases were mild and mortality rate was low.

On my one day off in NYC, I walked from the Upper East Side down through Park Avenue to Midtown, past Greenwich Village (home to Judge Sonia Sotomayor, the first Hispanic just nominated to the Supreme Court by the United States' first African American President) and south to Soho. Having my morning coffee and donut while reading the papers on a brilliant sunny morning in a busy Soho Starbucks must be one of life's little pleasures. Eventually I marched on to Ground Zero in the financial district, a symbol of the brutal 9/11 directed attack



The Editor with a medical colleague at the incomparable Kee's Chocolates, Soho, New York City.

by terrorists on American soil. Ground Zero still remained a deep hole with no gleaming building as burgeoning bureaucracy has stymied significant progress in raising the architectural symbol of American Resolve, here in the epicentre of the current global financial pandemic.

During the last global financial pandemic of 1929, another epidemic, psittacosis, spread panic and illness across the United States with a final tally of 169 recorded cases and over 30 deaths. It all started with a theatre stage parrot in Argentina who passed it to a human actor. In that dark era, Kleenex, Listerine and other hygiene products were born, and the-then Hygiene Laboratory where psittacosis research was being conducted and that also saw several scientists die from the infection, was transformed into the National Institute of Health. America's rugged resilience, dizzying diversity, unrivalled innovation, embedded ethos, hutzpah and gumption, debts notwithstanding, will see it through its own demons and another dark era, but rising healthcare cost will arguably be its most crippling epidemic, estimated at a 10 trillion dollar deficit in the next ten years.

Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, who was recovering from chicken pox, likened viral epidemic control to the War on Terror, in a season which saw the recapture of Mas Selamat. After Mas Selamat had escaped and terrorism continued to rear its ugly head

sporadically worldwide, Singapore did not close all borders and schools, nor put loaded M16 rifles under the beds of every able-bodied man, nor position armed guards in every *kopi tiam* and HDB void deck. Just as the flu bug and terrorists continue to lurk and linger, measures against influenza epidemics will need to be one of steeped rational vigilance based on emerging scientific and epidemiological evidence without crippling daily life and the economy – know thy enemy. Inter-agency coordinated operations all the way down to the ground have been comparably seamless so far and are an assuring testament of the system.

When I was working in the Tan Tock Seng Hospital's Accident and Emergency Department as a medical officer, a tiny baby who fell into a condominium swimming pool was brought in lifeless. Prolonged resuscitation by Dr Tham Kum Ying, the late Dr Alexandre Chao, myself and the A & E team could not revive the child who was pronounced dead to a pale of great sadness in that A & E. Since then, I have always been nervous at swimming pools with kids around. As we all know, Dr Chao succumbed to SARS and drowned in his own pulmonary blood and secretions in those last moments in the Singapore General Hospital's intensive care unit.

Such affecting memories must surely influence Singapore's and Asia's response to emerging viral epidemics. **SMA**