

Editorial

SARS, WAR AND DENTISTRY



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Despite all our modern sophistication, it is ironic that as of this writing, the 2 main headline grabbers are problems dating back to ancient times, namely war and infectious disease. By the time you read this, both the conflict in Iraq and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak will likely be fading from our television screens, newspapers and collective memories.

Yet the fact remains that the problems of war and infection will never go away. Their combined threat in the form of biological warfare has forced its way into the popular consciousness. Our colleagues at the American Dental Association (ADA) are taking this menace quite seriously, and we must never forget that deadly pathogens cross borders very easily.

A keynote speaker at the 2003 congress of CDA and the Alberta

Dental Association & College will deal with dentistry's role in the event of a bioterrorism attack. Dr. Al Guay, the ADA's chief policy advisor, has given considerable thought to biological weapons and how dentists can put their medical skills to good use in the event of an attack. The importance of this issue was impressed upon ADA during the anthrax scare in fall 2001.

What that scare demonstrated was that the public (and the profession) knew little about anthrax. As a result, the U.S. population was whipped into a frenzy of anxiety about contracting the condition. The episode also showed that public health services were ill-prepared to deal with biological weapons attacks.

These elements sound familiar to us today as we witness the panic and fear surrounding the appearance of the SARS disease in Canada that thankfully appears to have been successfully contained to the Toronto area. Of course, as SARS looks to be coming under control, there is a tendency to downplay the incident and shrug our shoulders, telling ourselves: "That issue was all hyped up."

At the height of the outbreak, I asked an eminent Canadian public health physician if he thought SARS represented a long-term threat to public health. While he felt it was too early to tell, he observed that "when a rich man gets a pain in his finger, the whole town knows about it; when a poor man dies, nobody hears of it." As he said that, I immediately thought of the 2 million deaths per annum caused by tuberculosis around the globe. Perspective is everything!

That being said, those caught in the eye of the storm don't have the luxury of sitting down to watch The Weather Channel. Dentists and patients were anxiously calling CDA, the Ontario Dental Association and the Royal College of Dental Surgeons

of Ontario, asking how to deal with the potential for SARS transmission in the dental office. All 3 organizations scrambled to collate information, especially Health Canada reports, and present this in a manner that is useful and pertinent to the needs of dentists. CDA's strategy was to direct members, mainly via *CDAlert* e-mail bulletins and updates on our Web site (www.cda-adc.ca), to information from public health authorities.

A lesson I take from this episode and the recent Dental Association of Canada affair is that it is very important for CDA to identify an emerging national issue as early as possible, gather pertinent information on that issue and disseminate it rapidly to members. The ability to update the information quickly and economically is vital.

As the SARS episode shows, the Internet is the superior communications tool to execute the gathering and dissemination of crucial information. Our estimation is that over 80% of Canadian dentists use the Internet, yet CDA has e-mail addresses for only 40% of our members.

If you give us your e-mail address, we can send you timely alerts on matters that are vital to your practice and profession. Our commitment to you is that we will not abuse the confidence you show in us. Perhaps the time has also come for CDA to set up a national e-mail discussion group where members can exchange important professionally related information. Such a forum could serve as a community builder and help CDA to have an even better feel for the pulse of the profession.

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