

SARS panic reminiscent of AIDS, activist tells Markham forum

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writer

The epidemic gripping the Greater Toronto Area is not SARS — it's panic, writer and activist June Callwood declared Thursday in Markham.

In a bid to calm fears about Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, Ms Callwood joined Toronto's medical officer of health Sheela Basrur and family physician Joseph Wong in a forum at Pacific Mall in Milliken, dubbed SARS and the Asian Community — Dispelling the Myths.

"I remember the early days of AIDS — people assumed all they had to do was avoid gay men," Ms Callwood said. "We see that now for what it was. It was panic. It was homophobia."

She said people who are avoiding Asian businesses and restaurants are making the same mistake.

"People afraid to go out on the street, people running businesses afraid of people coming into the store, the terrorizing of

children, or worse, children terrorizing other children because of this invisible virus... we will soon see SARS for what it is: a very minor, highly contagious virus."

Ms Basrur and Dr. Wong reiterated public health messages the risk of catching SARS is extremely low and urged the crowd of about 40 to support their local businesses.

'The message is to get on with our lives, not let them be taken over.'

"The outbreak is not over, but, in my opinion, it is definitely under control," said Ms Basrur. "There is an extremely important piece of good news and that is there have been no new cases for 10 days outside hospital staff."

"Avoiding shopping thinking you might get SARS from another customer or the cashier is the

wrong thing to do," she said. "It's important our reaction not be worse than the disease. It's essential we show the world a face that doesn't have a mask on it."

In York Region, every SARS case can be traced back to the original cases at Scarborough Grace hospital, said Dr. Humaira Khan, of the region's public health unit.

"We have not seen any transmission of SARS (in the community) at all," she said. "The message is to get on with our lives, not let them be taken over."

"I find it was a positive message," said banker Tommy Lee, who has clients who are retailers and has heard their complaints about the economic impact of SARS.

"It was very informative and I feel better now that I hear the stats and how they spoke about the illness," said Salina Sullivan, who also attended the forum.

"The fear is worse than SARS," added Bertina Law.



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