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SARS coverage criticized, applauded

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

While two professors say overkill media coverage of the SARS outbreak created a seige impression, York Region's associate medical officer of health praised the press.

Dr. Hanif Kassam said he doesn't believe the media overreacted during the SARS crisis.

Instead, the media gave residents vital information, such as the closure of health facilities and schools in York Region, he said.

"I take the perspective that the media is actually a friend of public health," said Dr. Kassam, who gave daily briefings to the media during the outbreak. "The professors are basing their findings on a theoretical level. They were not on the front lines."

York University professors Seth Feldman and Daniel Drache found saturation SARS coverage created the impression the disease was out of control in the Greater Toronto Area.

Their study found the sheer quantity gave the appearance SARS was a bigger threat than it was.

The spread of SARS in the GTA was mostly limited to health care facilities.

In York Region, a hot spot for the disease, there were 110 SARS cases, including nine deaths.

"This (report) shouldn't be seen as a value judgment," said Prof. Feldman, one of the report's authors and co-director of the Roberts Centre for Canadian Studies.

"We're not saying the media was irresponsible, we're not saying they were out of control.



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Norma James, secretary for the mental health unit at Markham Stouffville Hospital, receives a massage from Pamela Polley of the Unionville Massage and Therapy Centre Oct. 24. The event was to thank people who worked during the SARS crisis.

From my perspective, the media was being the media. But can you cover an epidemic without giving the impression the city is under siege?"

The report, called Media Coverage of the 2003 Toronto SARS Outbreak, a report on the role of the press in a public crisis.

It analysed coverage of the disease in three Toronto daily newspapers — the Toronto Star, the Globe and Mail and the

National Post — and two American newspapers — USA Today and the New York Times.

The authors looked at about 2,600 articles published from March 16 to June 15, from the initial outbreak, through the World Health Organization travel advisory and wrapping up with culmination of the second outbreak.

Stories looked at the health, economic and political impacts of the disease.

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