

York's SARS outbreak touched everyone

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

Granted, virtually no one walked the streets in protective face masks under fear of death, as much as CNN was determined to portray that image of us to the world.

But at the same time, it would also be difficult to find a York Region resident not touched in some way by last year's SARS crisis.

"Absolutely and without question, I would say SARS was the largest and most significant event for York Region in 2003," said associate medical officer of health, Dr. Hanif Kassam, who stickhandled the issue for the region.

"I think it is a situation that significantly and permanently changed how we deal with infectious diseases, not only in York Region, Ontario and Canada, but internationally.

York became a global hotspot for the potentially fatal respiratory disease, which gripped the international community last winter and spring.

Fred Tumell, chairperson of the Simcoe York District Health Council, believes SARS left a permanent imprint on a region particularly hard hit by the virus.

"It gave everybody a wake up call. It (a deadly contagious disease) can happen here and it can happen again. It will happen again, I think," he said, adding SARS also showed how well health care workers and institutions can work together to fight a crisis.

"We can't be complacent anymore. We have to be vigilant. It can arise anywhere at any time."

The region recorded nine deaths due to SARS, seven of which were York residents.

Another 110 residents were diagnosed and recovered from the illness born in China at the end of 2002.

Thousands of residents were quarantined at home after being exposed to the virus.

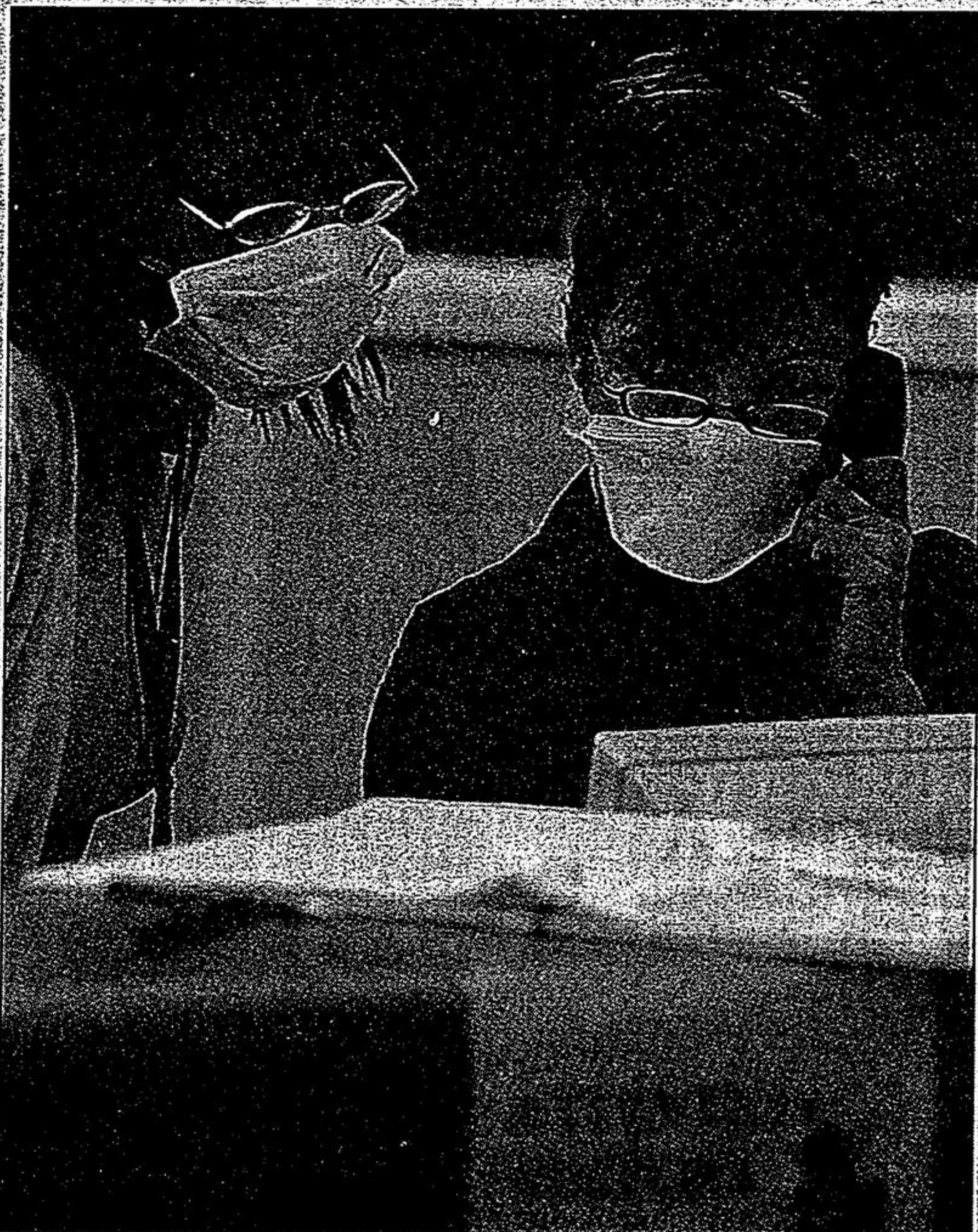
At the height of the first outbreak in early April, 5,000 York residents were quarantined. About 3,000 faced the same fate at the height of the second outbreak at the end of May.

York's medical staff were hardest hit by the SARS outbreaks.

In fact, Markham's Nelia Laroza, a veteran nurse at North York General Hospital, became the first health care worker in Ontario to die of SARS.

The 51-year-old mother, who died in July, was also connected to another group hard hit by SARS — the region's students.

Ms Laroza's son, who contracted



Staff at Markham Stouffville Hospital wore masks to protect themselves and patients during the first SARS outbreak in March.

the disease from his mother, unwittingly attended classes while infected with the contagious virus.

As a result, Markham's Father Michael McGivney Catholic Academy was shut down and its students and staff forced into quarantine.

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Father McGivney wasn't the only school impacted by the virus.

Hundreds of students at Alexander Mackenzie High School in Richmond Hill were quarantined because they had volunteered at or visited neighbouring York Central Hospital during March.

The hospital was forced to close for 20 days beginning March 28,

when a patient was found to be infected with the virus only several days after being admitted. The elderly man died.

Staff at Markham Stouffville were devastated when a nurse contracted the disease while treating SARS patients.

The diagnosis was one of the first indications: onerous precautions taken by medical staff weren't always enough to fend off the disease.

"The worst part for our group was the day we found out one of our co-workers was sick, even though she was fully protected," nurse Yvonne Warner said at the time.

"We all just broke down and cried. We all thought, 'If she got it, then I'm going to get it; my family is now at risk.' It was awful."

Meanwhile, Markham Stouffville was forced to close its overburdened emergency department to all but life-threatening cases for several days in April.

Blackout left region in dark

BY JEROME WATT
Staff Writer

Aug. 14, residents of York Region were among the 50 million people in Ontario and the United States who were plunged into darkness by the largest blackout in North American history.

How did York Region perform during the blackout and will it be ready for another?

Fortunately, things worked out well at Vaughan Hydro, chairperson for the utility and Councillor Susan Kadis said.

While control over the blackout was out of the local utility's hands, Vaughan Hydro's emergency preparedness plan worked well, she said.

An American-Canadian task force found Ohio power company, FirstEnergy Corp., triggered events that caused the blackout.

The supply of power in the province is managed by the Independent Marketing Operator, which doles out the power to local utilities.

Ms Kadis was also impressed by staff's performance during the blackout and public co-operation in reducing usage once power was restored.

Power consumption dropped 20 to 30 per cent when power was slowly restored the next day, in response to pleas by Vaughan Hydro officials to reduce usage.

Despite a good performance all-around, Ms Kadis said there are a few bugs that need to be ironed out.

In Markham, 19 natural gas fuelled generators installed on 14th Avenue to stop summer brown-outs were not used during the blackout because there was no working grid into which they could feed power.

While demand rose for York Regional Police, things went relatively well, said Insp. Mark Grant, head of the communications bureau.

The majority of calls were inquiry calls, as opposed to ones for service, he said.

In case of an emergency at police headquarters in Newmarket, such as a blackout, the communications staff members have practised moving operations to the Richmond Hill backup centre.

"We have implemented our

procedure if we have to bug out," Insp. Grant said.

The majority of the force's communications towers remained powered, but the secondary towers didn't have back-up electricity.

"We've installed supplementary power systems at every site (now)," Insp. Grant said.

Fortunately, crimes of opportunity were much lower than expected.

"There was no looting or widespread activity," he said. "It certainly had the potential to be worse than it was."

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Insp. Mark Grant
head of communications bureau
for York Regional Police

It took 1-1/2 days for police to catch up with the workload following the blackout, he said.

Even though Newmarket's Southlake Regional Health Centre had a backup generator, the hospital found it needed more power.

"We haven't had to run those generators (for so long) in anybody's lifetime," said Paul Clarry, vice-president of re-development and support services.

Following the blackout, Southlake officials conducted a study on some of the things they could improve upon.

While the main systems at the hospital were powered by a backup generator, non-essential services such as air conditioners, refrigerators and stoves weren't when the power went out.

The hospital's main computer system remained running throughout the blackout, but non-core computers were shut down.

In the future, the hospital will increase its power generation capacity so all these systems can keep running in the event of a blackout, Mr. Clarry said.

Staff also found stockpiles of batteries and flashlights set aside for the Y2K scare had been depleted. Mr. Clarry said staff will now have a dedicated supply in case such an emergency arises again.

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