

SARS lessons lead to improved disease control

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ON THE WEB

A decade ago, a new word, an acronym actually — SARS — crept into the global lexicon and our collective psyche.

Severe acute respiratory syndrome, a viral disease in humans, broke out in Hong Kong and threatened to become a pandemic.

The World Health Organization reported 8,273 cases and 775 deaths globally.

York Region was the second-largest centre for SARS in North America, following Toronto, with the first case diagnosed here March 15, 2003.

Eighty-six York residents were diagnosed with SARS, nine of whom were among the 44 GTA fatalities.

As with any major event, SARS taught us lessons, mostly important and some frivolous, medical professionals said.

York Region medical officer of health Dr. Karim Kurji recalled the SARS outbreak as a time of major challenges.

In 2003, he was Ontario's associate chief medical officer of health.

As part of the team co-ordinating a provincial response, he was linked to York Region.

"There were many unknowns and no treatment," he said. "We didn't have a great information system. We weren't getting information from the field."

Front-line medical staff, many pressed into 24/7 action, sometimes in quarantine, were at risk of burnout, he recalled.

Before Easter weekend, the province declared a state of emergency.

Dr. Kurji's team adopted an over-arching hospital containment strategy.

He lauded the media for disseminating timely news and advice and keeping the populous calm.

The herculean efforts of public health and hospital staff brought the two waves of the disease under control by early July.

It wasn't a perfect approach, he admitted, but it was effective.

During the course of the SARS outbreaks, York Region serviced 7,011 people in quarantine, distrib-



Check out yorkregion.com for more on SARS, including:

- ▶ A Holland Landing man whose cousin died alone due to the quarantine.
- ▶ An Aurora man who frequently travelled to the United States during the outbreak.
- ▶ A gallery of photographs from the outbreak.

uted 81,463 masks and 5,009 thermometers and delivered quarantine packages to 4,795 addresses.

Public health, hospital, police, EMS and Health Connection staff rallied to stem the tide.

The SARS episode spawned a range of new health care and infection control protocols. There's now a provincewide pandemic plan, co-ordinated with the federal government.

Frontline staff has the tools and training to deliver best practices, patient safety indicators are publicly reported and strategic investments in critical care capacity and infection control have been made.

Equally important, Public Health Ontario was created.

The organization supports infection prevention and control, disease surveillance, epidemiology and emergency preparedness.

SARS also ensured the chief medical officer of health has enhanced powers to issue directives during public health incidents.

SARS changed how we respond to a health-care crisis, Oak Ridges-Markham MPP Helena Jaczek, who was Dr. Kurji's predecessor, said.

It revamped how York Region and Ontario work with infectious

disease and emergency control and how various health care providers work together, she said.

In 2009, when our system was tested again by H1N1, we were able to handle the situation with greater precision and care due to the lessons learned though the SARS crisis and the important changes made to our health care system, Dr. Jaczek said in a recent media release.

Ten years ago and until 2005, Hastings and Prince Edward counties health unit medical officer of health Dr. Richard Schabas was York Central Hospital's chief of staff.

His take on SARS is more benign than those of his colleagues.

Health leaders in Ontario and the GTA took some effective measures during the SARS outbreaks, he said, but was critical of many of the procedures implemented.

He identified several areas of concern, including reporting the daily tally of suspected and cumulative cases, which gave the impression the disease was out of control.

Instead, limiting the count to probable cases would have given a more accurate picture, he said.

Measures that needlessly placed thousands of residents in quarantine and closed York Central Hospital, now Mackenzie Health Richmond Hill, for 20 days were "draconian", he said.

"There was a huge amount of uncertainty and anxiety," he said. "The key lesson to remember is how important it is to keep perspective.

The problem was in only a handful of hospitals around the world. SARS never caused significant problems outside hospitals and became very easy to manage."

The real issue was the slow assessment of the situation and speculation, he said.

Quarantines, in his opinion, were a waste of time.

The province was obsessed with infectious disease containment and not the source, he said, adding, while practical lessons were learned, the medical community missed initial indicators about the virus.

"There were clues about a pandemic in the beginning and they were ignored," he said. "It wasn't



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Mackenzie Health Richmond Hill chief practice officer Tiziana Rivera (left) and patient care vice-president Jo-Anne Marr use one of the hand washing stations installed since the SARS outbreak.

what we thought it would be."

The physician is unapologetic. "SARS was an unusual event," he said. "Yes, it affected thousands of people and I don't want to trivialize it, but when you look at the numbers of people who die of tuberculosis each year, it was no real big deal."

Others beg to differ.

Mackenzie Health patient care vice-president Jo-Anne Marr and chief practice officer Tiziana Rivera were front-line administrators in

2003, Ms Marr with the University Health Network at Toronto Western Hospital and Ms Rivera at Baycrest.

"The SARS experience is a significant reminder external events can cause a major interruption in your business operation," Ms Marr said. "In our case, that operation was health care."

The outbreak underscored the transient nature of diseases, Ms Rivera said.

"With global travel, an epidemic is only a plane ride away," she said.

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