Hong Kong Rotarians joint fight against SARS - 2003

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The months of March to June in 2003 was the unforgettable hard time of the entire Hong Kong population, economically and socially, due to the outbreak of SARS which led to the discouragement of public gatherings resulting many of the Rotary clubs had to reluctantly suspend their regular weekly meetings. SARS, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, is a viral respiratory disease of zoonotic origin. Between November 2002 and July 2003, the outbreak of SARS in southern China caused an eventual 8,098 cases, resulting in 774 deaths reported in 37 countries, with the majority of cases in Hong Kong (9.6% fatality rate) according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Herbert K. Lau, the then Deputy Information Coordinator of District 3450, liaised Vukoni Lupa-Lasaga of Rotary International Media Office to write a brief report on how the "Hong Kong Rotarians joint fight against SARS", and to put up on 《The Rotarian》Magazine September 2003 Issue. Read the full text on the annex 2 pages. Prior to the reading, learn here the background of the disaster:

The SARS Outbreak

The SARS epidemic appeared to have started in Guangdong Province, China, in November 2002 where the first case was reported that same month. The outbreak first appeared on 27 November 2002, when Canada's Global Public Health Intelligence Network (GPHIN) picked up reports of a "flu outbreak" in China through Internet media monitoring and analysis and sent them to the WHO.

In Hong Kong, the first cohort of affected people were discharged from the hospital on 29 March 2003. The disease spread in Hong Kong from a mainland doctor who arrived in February and stayed on the ninth floor of the Metropole Hotel in Kowloon, infecting 16 of the hotel visitors. Those visitors later travelled to Canada, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam, spreading SARS to those locations. Another larger cluster of cases in Hong Kong centralized on the Amoy Gardens housing estate. Its spread was suspected to have been facilitated by defects in its drainage system.

The Disaster

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) reached Hong Kong in March 2003. From 11 March up to 6 June, a total of 1,750 cases had been identified, and during the same period 286 people died of the disease. Before the advent of SARS in Hong Kong, the nearby Guangdong Province in China mainland had experienced an intense outbreak of the atypical pneumonia later termed SARS. This outbreak started in November 2002 and reached its peak in February 2003; up to 5 June 2003, Guangdong had recorded 1,511 cases and 57 deaths. Later in April 2003, SARS cases were reported in other provinces and cities of China mainland including Beijing, Shanxi, Inner Mongolia, Tianjin and Hebei. Up to 5 June 2003, China mainland had a total of 5,329 cases with 336 reported deaths.

From March onwards, SARS was detected in other countries and areas in the Asia-Pacific region. By the beginning of June, Singapore had had 205 cases with 28 deaths, Vietnam 63 cases with 5 deaths and Taiwan 686 cases with 81 deaths.

The prevention and control measures

The prevention and control measures undertaken in Hong Kong include: (1) preventive education and publicity; (2) tracing the source of infection; (3) introducing five major control measures (compulsory isolation and surveillance of contacts, stopping school and university education sessions, exchange of epidemiological information between Hong Kong and China mainland, temperature checking of travellers at points of entry and exit, district-wide cleansing campaigns); (4) strengthening collaboration and communication with China mainland and the WHO; and (5) developing a quick diagnostic test for SARS. The next page gives readers the picture on Hong Kong Rotarians in action.

Hong Kong Rotarians join fight against SARS

After it broke out in China's Guangdong province in mid-November 2002, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) hopscotched its way along major airline routes into 28 countries. According to figures compiled by the World Health Organization, the epidemic has infected more than 8,400 people and caused about 800 deaths.

The Rotarians of District 3450 (Hong Kong) found themselves on the front lines of the effort to stop the spread of SARS. At the end of February, the region became the center of the epidemic after two infected travelers from mainland China carried the virus to Hong Kong. The public reacted with panic to the news of the new disease.

"Citizens are living in fear because nobody can guarantee when or who will be infected, even the family members living under the same shelter," says Herbert Lau, deputy information coordinator for District 3450. "What we can do now, as Rotarians, is to help the government to rebuild the confidence of the people."

District 3450 set up a special committee to do that and more. It supports Rotarian and non-Rotarian SARS projects through various fundraising appeals. In addition, the district ran video ads on giant outdoor screens to provide SARS information and messages of support to medical workers.

The flagship of the district's effort is a Web site (www.rotary3450.org/news/sars) that documents SARS-related club activities, such as the following:

• To honor the memory of club member Dr. James Lau, who died after contracting SARS from a patient, the Rotary Club of Kowloon East is raising funds to support SARS research at the University of Hong Kong. More than HK$5 million (US$641,000) has been raised.

• Teaming up with other volunteers, the Rotary Club of Hou Kuong, Macau, raised money to purchase and distribute 1,500 packs of protective accessories consisting of a bottle of liquid household bleach, face masks, a thermometer, and SARS information leaflets to low-income families.

• The Rotary Club of Kowloon North donated US$10,000 to Project Shield, run by the *South China Morning Post*, to provide protective clothing and equipment for medical staff. It also supplied 100 floor fans to improve ventilation in the homes of elderly people who cannot afford them.

• With the support of medical faculty from two Hong Kong universities, the Rotary Club of Channel Islands hosted a well-attended SARS information session. The club then initiated a district-wide fundraising campaign to help raise HK$200,000 (US$25,643) to provide protective gear for medical students and faculty at both universities.

• Members of the Rotary Club of Tolo Harbour sponsored a "fear busters" workshop aimed at providing accurate information about the disease. The Rotary Club of Hong Kong Bayview distributed 20,000 face masks and 100 boxes of liquid soap to needy city residents and other members of the public.

• Moved by the heroic deaths of two medical workers, district Interact leaders collected 300 letters of appreciation from Interactors in Hong Kong and posted them on a notice board in the lobby of the Hong Kong Hospital Authority. With the support of the Rotary Club of Kingspark, they published a letter in two local newspapers aimed at encouraging young Hong Kong residents to acknowledge and emulate the selflessness of medical workers fighting the epidemic.

— VUKONI LUPA-LASAGA

Shoppers at a computer mall in Hong Kong wear masks to protect against SARS.