Dear Colleague

SEVERE ACUTE RESPIRATORY SYNDROME (SARS) AND JOINT SYMPOSIUM

Why is this message necessary?

We have received requests for information on the situation in Singapore with regards to the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). Those making the requests were wondering whether the Symposium will still go ahead. I am sending you this message to clarify the situation.

What is SARS?

SARS is a type of atypical pneumonia. It is caused by a virus (now identified to belong to the coronavirus family) not previously known to the medical and scientific experts. Its symptoms are a sudden onset of high fever (temperature above 38°C), a dry cough, aches in the muscles, and, in some cases, diarrhoea. After 3 to 7 days the patient may experience shortness of breath. In 80% to 90% of the cases the patient gradually recovers. However, in a few cases (10% to 15%), after about 7 days, the pneumonia progresses and the patient needs treatment in the intensive care unit. Several of such patients also recover. Whereas the fatality rate is relatively low (in fact, below 6% to 9%) in all countries which are currently being affected by the illness, there is a lot of fear about it because so little is known about it, even by the experts.

SARS is transmitted by close personal contact (mainly through infectious droplets for example when a person coughs or sneezes) and exposure to objects contaminated by an affected person. Knowledge about the virus so far shows that it is not air borne; it cannot be transmitted through a building’s ventilation system.

How is SARS affecting Singapore, and what has been the nation’s response?

As most of you would have noticed, the government of Singapore has been completely open about the illness and its impact on the country. I will also give you full information in this message about what is happening here. The government has taken decisive action in an attempt to control the SARS. For example, pre-tertiary level schools were closed for several days in the initial stages of the outbreak. There is a system of various levels of quarantine for persons suspected to have SARS, together with a dedicated hospital for patients. Institutions or outlets, or parts of them, where an infected person is detected are immediately closed, and the people deemed to have been exposed to SARS quarantined. Taxi drivers take their temperature twice a day, and display a badge declaring that they...
are free from SARS. Efforts are made to trace the passengers of any taxi driver who becomes ill from SARS; a recording system is being introduced (although on a voluntary basis).

Thermal imaging scanners have been set up at the airport and all other entry points to screen all passengers (whether arriving or departing). On their part, employer organisations, as well as individuals, have shown a considerable amount of social responsibility. Most organizations have introduced twice-daily screening programmes for their employees.

**What are the most likely future developments in Singapore with regard to SARS?**

Personally, I believe there is cause to be hopeful. As a result of the vigilance now being shown by all in this country, the rate of the spread of SARS has been falling progressively. There have been no new cases of SARS for several days now. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has directed that the spread of SARS has peaked in Singapore. The researchers have made breakthroughs in the development of a credible testing procedure, and are continuing, at full speed, the work to find an effective response.

**How will SARS affect the Joint Symposium, and what is being done by the Organising Committee?**

Most events involving congregations of large numbers of people which were scheduled from the middle of April to around the middle of June have been postponed. At the moment we are confident that the Symposium can safely be held as scheduled on 22-24 October 2003. In fact, September to December are favourite time slots for many of the events which are now being rescheduled.

We can assure all of you that we will not ask anyone to expose himself/herself to any unnecessary risks. Thus, we will provide full information on developments relating to SARS, and postpone the Symposium if the evidence shows that the delegates will face danger. We will provide monthly updates on the situation. Meanwhile, we will not start registering delegates for the time being. However, owing to the long time frame necessary, we must proceed with the refereeing, refinement and printing of the papers. So, please send us your papers.

**How do we sign off?**

At this stage, we are very confident in saying that we look forward to seeing you in Singapore in October.

Best regards

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