

The SARS Epidemic

Recent Health news around the world has been almost exclusively focused on the progression of a mystery virus that currently has over 2500 reported cases in at least 17 countries. These numbers are very alarming for members of the World Health Organization as they struggle to understand the virus' nature and origin. The disease, which is known as SARS or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, results in pneumonia-like symptoms and related complications. As the numbers of infected people rises, so too does the number of deaths related to the disease. Thus far, 95 people of the over 2500 cases have died as a result of infection. These deaths have occurred in nearly all of the 17 countries that have had reported cases. As this disease spreads, the WHO is working through the politics of the country of China, where 1200 of the 2500 cases have been reported. This obstacle to the doctors is causing major setbacks as China struggles with allowing western doctors to enter its borders.

In the last week, the earliest case of SARS was traced to a province of Southern China. This case and several hundred more were hidden from the world community by the Chinese government in the early months of the disease's life. Many officials in the World Health Organization have made statements that relate the lack of early Chinese cooperation with attempts to contain and prevent infection to the rest of the world might very well be one of the largest and most upsetting facts related to this story. The statements have verbally bashed China for its role in the elevation of the disease from a regional issue to full-blown global epidemic. The politics of this disease will likely lead

to increased scrutiny of health-related commerce matters in the international community such as plane travel and communicable diseases.

Another problem that surrounds the disease is the complex science that has given birth to the disease. Recently, the nature of the disease has been tied to the infectious sexually-transmitted disease Chlamydia which has respiratory-related symptoms similar to SARS. The interesting and extremely complex portion of the problem is the fact that it appears that it is not merely Chlamydia alone working in the SARS cases, but also a form of a coronavirus similar to the common cold and diarrhea viruses. These coronaviruses have no cures or vaccines as of yet. The necessity for a vaccine that SARS presents to the world community is pressing the WHO towards developing a vaccine as quickly as possible to contain infections.

The final issue related to SARS that has made an appearance in recent weeks is the methods that are being implemented to prevent infection. The most common practice in China has been for citizens to purchase and wear small face masks that are used in also used as surgical masks so that surgeons don't infect the open sites of patients. These masks do a fair job of preventing transmission of bacteria and molds that lead to many diseases; however, the masks are not impregnable to viruses. The masks are a moderate level of protection against infection, however, the only truly effective method of containment of the virus has been quarantine. The WHO has very high hopes that the spread of the disease can be contained in 2-3 weeks with increased quarantines and additional control of the transmission of the virus.

No matter what precautions are taken to prevent the spread, this virus is serving as a reminder to the world that our technology has not won all of the battles that nature

has presented to us. It is even more interesting to think about the prospect of whether or not such battles can ever be won by technology and science.