

What started as a strange but not terribly serious flu outbreak in Southeast Asia has quickly become, only over the past month, a “worldwide health threat,” as the World Health Organization (W.H.O.) called the illness, now known as severe acute respiratory syndrome, SARS for short. The W.H.O. has established laboratories in more than nine countries, all devoted to finding the virus that causes this illness. The labs are designated P-3, the second-highest hazard level. Presently, in addition to studying the numerous possible SARS-causing agents, health scientists and officials are also trying to determine the methods in which SARS is spread. Thus far, it seems as if the strain of illness can be contracted through the air, by object contact, or by face-to-face contact.

The coronavirus, a common cold virus that is relatively mild in humans but can trigger serious sicknesses in cats, dogs, and farm animals, is currently the prime suspect for SARS. However, the process in determining and classifying a virus is complicated and dangerous and may take some time. And additionally, coronavirus is not a very well-studied virus; its full effects and proof that coronavirus is indeed the causal agent do not yet exist. Tests after tests have already been run and hopefully, preliminary results will soon appear. Severe acute respiratory syndrome was identified by Dr. Carlo Urbani, who died of the disease himself on Saturday, March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2003, almost two weeks after the first death blamed on the illness occurred. Symptoms of SARS are a 100+ degree fever, chills, dry cough, and muscle aches. Right now, there exists no cure, and Lawrence K. Altman writes that “no drug is effective against SARS,” but anti-viral drugs, particularly Ribavirin, are still being used right now to lessen symptoms and effects of the disease.

So far, approximately 1900 people in 16 countries have been affected by the respiratory illness, and at least 63 people have died from it. There have been 3 cases identified in Massachusetts, 15 in the United States. Villages in Hong Kong, as well as a Singapore college, have been quarantined and cut off from public contact, and the World Economic Forum recently postponed a meeting to be held in Beijing this spring to a later date in the fall. Boats traveling between Taiwan and China have been stopped, and many more precautionary procedures have been taken to prevent the spread of the disease. Residents in Hong Kong daily wear face masks. The Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, GA has issued numerous warnings and concerns to travelers, especially those voyaging to Asia. Just today, an American Airlines flight from Tokyo to San Jose, California was kept on the runway for more than 2 hours because 4 members on the plane were starting to complain of symptoms that related to SARS.

It has been said that “officials at the [World Health Organization] cannot recall the last time the agency has issued a global alert for an acute outbreak of a disease.” Many in society have just come to realize that this illness is far more perilous and serious than previously thought.