

CHAPTER FIVE: The Victims of SARS

Death on the Front Lines

Three medical workers on the front lines died during the SARS outbreak. One was a family doctor and the other two were nurses.⁷⁹³ The deaths shook the health care community, spawning calls for a better information flow to family doctors and better protection in the workplace for all who work in hospitals.⁷⁹⁴

Nelia Laroza

Nelia Laroza was the first of two nurses to die during the SARS outbreak. She worked at North York General Hospital and succumbed when SARS reappeared after authorities thought they had beaten the outbreak. She was 52 years old and died on June 29, 2003.

Her death sent shockwaves through the nursing and medical communities. Her funeral was attended by union leaders and politicians, including Ernie Eves, Ontario's Premier at the time. An honour guard of nurses, wearing black armbands, paid tribute to her at her funeral.

Nelia Laroza was known for her skills and was well respected by doctors and colleagues. She was an unlikely candidate to be struck by SARS because she was meticulous about precautions against infection.

A nurse who worked with her for a decade told the Commission:

... a great loss. And she was so paranoid about SARS that when they first came forward and told us, she always dressed in a gown. We were

793. A fourth medical worker, Adela Catalon, a nursing aide at a Toronto retirement home, also died of SARS, in the Philippines. Her story is told in the chapter "The Lapsley Family Doctors' Clinic."

794. Because the names of these three health workers and the particulars of their illnesses are already in the public domain, they are disclosed openly in this report.

100 percent dressed in gowns, she was 120 per cent dressed in gown. She was so paranoid about SARS.

And we just couldn't understand why she died.

Nelia Laroza feared SARS from its first outbreak at Scarborough Grace Hospital. She did not work there, but it was not far from her family home. Members of her family told the Commission that she bought masks and family members carried anti-bacterial hand wash at all times.

Whenever her daughter picked her up from work, she had to wait in the parking lot and call her mother on a cellphone. Nelia did not want her daughter to wait inside the hospital, fearing that the air was contaminated.

When she came home, she headed for the shower and changed her clothes before hugging any members of her family.

A doctor who worked with her had nothing but praise for Nelia:

She was a good nurse, very casual, without any sort of announcement, was very professional, good with her patients, and had the ability to pick up on if something was changing in them. She would identify it; she'd let you know.

Nelia was someone who, if she called you, and said "I'm worried about so-and-so," it would be because they've done this and this. Other people might not be as clinically observant or have the ability to communicate it ... Nelia was just very good that way. She was as good as it gets for anyone, she was just your good, basic, decent person.

Nelia followed the strict protection regimen even after the authorities declared that SARS was contained.

She worked on the orthopedic ward of North York General, where the second outbreak started and many of her colleagues became ill.

Toronto Public Health records show that she became ill with fever and muscle aches on May 16. She went to hospital on May 21, but was sent home with a diagnosis of "viral illness."⁷⁹⁵ She returned to the hospital on May 23 as a patient and was admit-

795. Toronto Public Health Case Review.

ted with a diagnosis of possible SARS. She died on June 29.

Nelia Laroza was born in the Philippines on October 10, 1951. She worked as a nurse for more than 20 years, 13 of them at North York General. She lived with her husband, Emiliano, daughter, Grace, and son, Kenneth. At the time, her children were 23 and 16 years old.

All were quarantined but only her son was infected. He recovered. More than 1,500 members of his school were also quarantined.

The doctor who worked with her told the Commission:

... she took great pride in her work and her kids, and ... Nelia [and I], we both followed protocol. But Nelia was seeing those patients, a larger number of patients more frequently. And I've often said, the reason that she contracted SARS is because she was a good nurse, in the sense that she was a bedside nurse, made good notes, looked after her patients.

Tony Clement, Minister of Health for Ontario at the time, had this comment on Nelia's death:

Anyone who works day in, day out to protect the rest of us from any manner of disease, when you lose one who is acting heroically, it's a loss for everyone.⁷⁹⁶

Tecla Lin

Tecla Lin was one of the first health workers to volunteer to take care of SARS patients, and the second nurse to succumb to SARS. She worked at the West Park Healthcare Centre, where ill staff from Scarborough Grace Hospital were brought into a SARS unit established especially to cope with the outbreak.⁷⁹⁷

796. CTV News report, July 4, 2003.

797. West Park Healthcare Centre, media release, July 21, 2003.

Ms. Lin's first shift was on March 24, 2003, and her last on April 2, 2003. The following day she had fever, muscle pain and a cough and on April 4 was admitted to Sunnybrook Hospital and later transferred to William Osler Health Centre. She died on July 19 from complications of SARS. Tecla Lin was 58 years old.⁷⁹⁸

Her husband, Chi Sui Lin, also developed a fever and after a brief quarantine period because of his wife's exposure to SARS was admitted to Toronto East General Hospital, where he died on April 26. Mr. Lin was 77 years old and had previous health problems.⁷⁹⁹

Ms. Lin was a popular and respected nurse who had a special empathy with patients. Her death devastated those who worked with her.

A doctor at West Park told the Commission:

When Tecla Lin died it was the worst. I did not think I was very well for a while. I did not want to go anywhere, I just wanted to be home. I was tired ... it was like [I] had been through an earthquake.

Tecla Lin was born in Hong Kong on December 18, 1944. She had more than 35 years' experience as a registered nurse in Hong Kong and Canada. She began her nursing career in 1968 in Kowloon, after graduating from the Government School of Nursing. For the next five years, she worked as an operating room nurse.

In 1973, she moved to Canada with her husband and two sons. From 1977 to 1998, she worked at the Doctor's Hospital in Toronto, where she developed specialized skills in monitoring intensive and critical care unit patients. During that time she earned a Bachelor of Applied Arts in Nursing and a Certificate in Critical Care Nursing from Ryerson University.

She worked at West Park part-time and also had another part-time job, at the Toronto Rehabilitation Institute.⁸⁰⁰

798. Toronto Public Health Case Review.

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800. West Park Healthcare Centre, media release, July 21, 2003.

Survivors include her sons, Wilson and Michael Tang, who were toddlers when the family moved to Canada.

Michael Tang told the *Toronto Star*:

My mother died on the battlefield of SARS. She was ready and willing to take on risks and dangers. She died with a lot of honour and dignity.⁸⁰¹

Tecla Lin never told her children that she was caring for SARS patients. Michael Tang told the *Toronto Star*:

I don't believe she considered it a lethal career decision.⁸⁰²

Politicians and medical dignitaries attended her funeral at Elgin Mills Cemetery. Tecla Lin was a Buddhist and believed in reincarnation. Her sons placed items she would need in her next life with her body: her glasses, purse, makeup, photos of her deceased husband and a calculator.

Her son told the *Star*:

She always had tons of calculators.

Dr. Nestor Yanga

Dr. Nestor Yanga, a family physician working at a small family doctors' clinic in Toronto, was the only North American physician to die of SARS. Dr. Yanga, 55, was one of four doctors at the Lapsley Clinic in northeast Toronto. Two other doctors at the clinic also contracted SARS but survived. The story of the Lapsley Clinic is told elsewhere in this report.

Many of Dr. Yanga's patients were members of Toronto's Filipino community of about 200,000 people. When SARS struck, some its members who had attended a religious retreat started showing symptoms and came to the clinic to be checked.

801. *Toronto Star*, "Tecla and Chi Sui Lin," September 27, 2003.

802. *Toronto Star*, "Tecla and Chi Sui Lin," September 27, 2003.

Dr. Yanga examined a BLD (Bukas Loob Sa Diyos) member as well as other members of the S family, whose story is told earlier. Details about SARS had not yet reached all the family doctors, and he wore no protective equipment when he examined the patients. Late on April 4, Dr. Yanga developed fever, muscle pain and fatigue. The next day he began to cough and went to a SARS assessment clinic in nearby Markham. He was sent home and told to quarantine himself. When his condition became worse, he was admitted to Sunnybrook Hospital on April 8. He died on August 14, 2003, from complications of SARS.⁸⁰³

More than 2,000 people attended his funeral at St. Michael's Cathedral in downtown Toronto. The mourners included Tony Clement, then Ontario's Minister of Health, and Dr. Larry Erlick, then President of the Ontario Medical Association.

In a statement, Dr. Erlick said:

Dr. Yanga's caring and devotion to his patients serve as an outstanding example of the commitment and professionalism that define what it means to be a physician.

Doctors put their lives on the line every day that they go to work. Dr. Yanga demonstrated determination and dedication to the profession and to his patients – he is an example for us all.⁸⁰⁴

As the *Toronto Star* reported, many at the funeral wept as Dr. Yanga's younger son, Ronald, 16, said he was planning to buy a "Welcome home, Dad" banner when he got the news that his father had died:

I always thought he would be there forever and I wouldn't have even to think of him being gone ... It's hard to know that he's not going to be home anymore.⁸⁰⁵

Dr. Bina Comendador, a friend of Dr. Yanga, told *The Globe and Mail* newspaper:

803. Toronto Public Health Case Review.

804. Ontario Medical Association media release, August 14, 2003.

805. "Poignant tribute to MDs' rare spirit," *Toronto Star*, August 20, 2003.

He was the kind of person you could respect and really care about, and I think his patients felt that too. He would make you feel that you were special and that you were the most important patient.⁸⁰⁶

Dr. Yanga was a former president of the Canadian Filipino Medical Association and a dedicated general practitioner and church volunteer. According to friends, he was passionate about everything he did. He loved dancing, gardening and spending time with his two sons, Nelson and Ronald. At the time of his death they were 20 and 16.

Dr. Yanga was born on October 8, 1948, in Malabon, the Philippines. He studied medicine at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila. He specialized in surgery and graduated in 1975. He immigrated to Canada in 1981. In the same year, he married Remy, whom he had met during a visit two years earlier. He took his medical exams in Canada and interned at a hospital in Newfoundland and then at two hospitals in Toronto.

He studied at McMaster University and the University of Toronto, intending to become a psychiatrist, but he changed his mind in his third year and chose family medicine instead.

While at the Lapsley Clinic, Dr. Yanga assisted with surgeries at Scarborough Centenary Hospital and worked as a volunteer at the sexual assault centre at Scarborough Grace Hospital. He and his wife were dedicated members of the charismatic Catholic group Bukas Loob Sa Diyos (BLD).

Dr. Yanga had a lifelong passion for ballroom dancing, which he enjoyed with his wife. He was a consummate family man who reserved time for his wife and two sons.⁸⁰⁷

806. "A life cut short by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome," *The Globe and Mail*, September 5, 2003.

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