

In this interim report I have attempted to avoid, and I invite the reader to avoid, the unfair use of hindsight to judge the actions of those who struggled so valiantly in the fog of battle against the unknown and deadly virus that is SARS.

4. What Went Right?

Despite everything that went wrong SARS was eventually contained by the extraordinary personal efforts of not only front line hospital workers, and the public health workers in the field, but also by an exceptional group of scientists, doctors, epidemiologists, local Medical Officers of Health and other public health professionals who came forward when needed. SARS was eventually contained not by any central public health system but by the heroic work of those who stepped forward during the crisis.

The litany of problems listed in this report reflect weaknesses in central public health systems. These weaknesses hampered the work of the remarkable individuals who eventually contained SARS. The problems of SARS were systemic problems, not people problems. Despite the deep flaws in the system, it was supported by people of extraordinary commitment.

One observer, talking of the work of the Epi Unit, built from scratch as the outbreak unfolded, referred to the remarkable work done by those who pitched in quickly in order to plug the gaps in the existing systems:

I wanted to make what I hope will be a really strong point and that is that amazing work was done by a lot of amazing people. People who cared passionately about public health, who cared passionately about doing good work under very trying circumstances . . . We had great epidemiologists, we had incredible technical support people . . . And we had great communications with some people outside of the Ministry, with other levels of government, with other jurisdictions and I think that sheer force of will in some cases is why SARS was beaten in this province and I don't want that to be forgotten. So just to, give kudos and say thank you to people who actually never got any formal thank you's.

Another expert from outside Ontario, while quite candid about the problems in the Ontario public health system, remarked how despite all those problems, a large number of people worked very hard to contain SARS. He stated:

I remain in awe of how hard a whole bunch of people were working at trying to deal with the issue of SARS. I have the utmost respect for the efforts that people put into some situations literally putting their lives on the line. For someone who has done infectious diseases in Canada for a long time, that is very unusual but I mean people and particularly in the front line were working unbelievably hard. So were the people in . . . and I do not want to be implied that some of the others in the more senior decision making were not working hard; they were working to the best of their ability so that was good. In any major outbreak investigation that I have been involved, it has been gratifying to see how people step up to the plate and put in the major efforts that they are required and some will do it for months on end.

One official from the Centres for Disease Control in Atlanta, made the following remarks:

Let me begin by saying I think this is my personal view, not necessarily that of my agency. But I will speak plainly because what you are doing is so vitally important and it's precedent setting. So I will speak plainly. I hope you will take my comments perhaps with a grain of salt but I think personally that what is going on here is one of those examples of heroes without honour in their native land. I think that the . . . more I watch the story as it unfolds and is told and retold, I have a profound sense of awe and respect for some true heroes that stepped up and, and I don't think there is a health officer in the United States . . . that goes to bed at night that sometime doesn't hope, if it happens here, we will do as good a job as Toronto did. You are to be commended for this.

The strength of Ontario's response lay in the extraordinary work of the people who stepped up and fought SARS. What went right, in a system where so much went wrong, is their dedication. It cannot, however, be said that things went right because SARS was eventually contained. It does nothing for those who suffered from SARS or lost loved ones to SARS to say that the disease which caused their suffering was ultimately contained. For the families of those who died from SARS and for all those who suffered from it, little if anything went right. This enormous toll of suffering requires that the Ontario government commit itself to rectify the deep problems in the public health system uncovered by SARS.

5. A Constellation of Problems

Despite the eventual success in containing SARS, so many things went wrong in the provincial public health response that it is difficult to know where to start. These problems include:

- Problem 1: The Decline of Public Health
- Problem 2: Lack of Preparedness: The Pandemic Flu Example
- Problem 3: Lack of Transparency
- Problem 4: Lack of Provincial Public Health Leadership
- Problem 5: Lack of Perceived Independence
- Problem 6: Lack of Public Health Communication Strategy
- Problem 7: Poor Coordination with the Federal Government
- Problem 8: A Dysfunctional Public Health Branch
- Problem 9: Lack of Central Public Health Coordination
- Problem 10: Lack of Central Expertise
- Problem 11: No Established Scientific Backup
- Problem 12: Lack of Laboratory Capacity
- Problem 13: No Provincial Epidemiology Unit
- Problem 14: Inadequate Infectious Disease Information Systems
- Problem 15: Overwhelming and Disorganized Information Demands
- Problem 16: Inadequate Data
- Problem 17: Duplication of Central Data Systems