

## **Communicating SARS: Civil Liberties Versus Community Responsibility**

September 8, 2003, 5:30pm  
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### **Singapore Background**

#### **Geography**

Singapore is an island-city-state located at the horn of the Straits of Melacca. It is 24 sq. miles, with a population of 4 million. It is located between Indonesia and Malaysia (the world's two largest Muslim countries). Singapore has only one land bridge access- most access is by water and air.

#### **Politics**

One party system (for all practical purposes). Leadership is determined by succession. Opposition and criticism against the government is small but allowed. There are no anti-war protests.

#### **Economy**

90% of the population owns flats, and its citizens enjoy one of the world's highest standards of living. There is very low unemployment. Singapore went from an undeveloped nation to a developed one in 35 years (and they are proud of it). Competitive with China, Hong Kong, and Japan. Financial capital- with Hong Kong and Tokyo; 1st or 2nd busiest port in the world (vs. Rotterdam);

#### **Culture**

Multicultural mandate, making money, shopping, eating, traveling (among the middle class); concern for creativity and open and innovative thinking (applied to economic growth more than political ideas)

#### **Values**

The group has more value than the individual, which is customary in Southeast Asia. For example, a tax assessment receipt reads: "Thank you for contributing towards nation building." (As opposed to the US, which values individual rights).

EXAMPLES from HEALTH: Cleanliness; car cell phone use; the use of masks to prevent others from becoming ill.

**In summation:** Singapore is an unusual mixture of highly competitive capitalism where the government runs the country as a "business" with socialist-style programs.

**What is Public Health in the Context of Community Responsibility?**

**Relevant historical examples**

- 1944: The US established the Public Health Service Act, which gave federal authority to impose quarantines for certain diseases, including: smallpox, Tuberculosis, plague, hemorrhagic fevers. Bush added SARS to the list in 2003.
- Mandatory school vaccinations - Jacobson vs. Massachusetts (1905, US Supreme Court)

**Public health as compared to medical care**

<b>PUBLIC HEALTH</b>	<b>MEDICAL CARE</b>
Community	Individual
Prevention	Treatment
Team of public health professionals	Solitary clinicians

- Where do we spend more \$ in the US?

**Public health in your lives**

- Public health as social justice; an ethic based on what is good for the greatest number, and not on privilege, power, or economics.
- When public health works, we rarely hear about it; its effects may take years to coalesce.
- Infringements on your liberties, including stop lights, drinking water, and waste disposal. In Singapore, these are not issues because the "collective" is more highly valued than the individual.
- Is it always successful?

-No. We are currently not a nation that values regulating the environment or changing political/social structures that could improve the health of the population.

-Most common public health practices are largely limited to health education activities (e.g., teaching kids to brush their teeth instead of fluoridating the water supply)

**SARS Chronology**

- November 16, 2002: Guandong (Southeast China) reports 5 deaths and 300 infections from a "mystery pneumonia."
- February 16, 2002: Hanoi reports "mystery" pneumonia-like infections.
- March 5: Toronto reports SARS infections.
- March 13: Singapore- 3 women return from Hong Kong and require hospitalization
- March 15: Singapore reports a total of 16 cases.
- March 16: Singapore Ministry of Health publishes preventative actions.
- March 19: "Face Masks Flying Off the Shelves"  
This week the MOH announces that Tan Tock Seng Hospital will be cleared of all non-SARS patients so that it may devote itself entirely to SARS.
- March 26: All schools closed: MOH admits they are doing so as a reaction to parents' fears and not as a medical or public health necessity for the prevention of SARS!

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- March 26: Home Quarantine Orders: 10 days, \$5,000 fine for 1st violation, \$10,000 and 6 months in prison for a 2nd violation, and spot checks by security.  
-860 people from 440 families ordered into quarantine. The government asks employers to consider paid leave for quarantines. Singaporeans believe in the "element of trust."
- March 26: China breaks its silence on SARS.
- March 27: Andy Ho article on "Candor"
- March 28: Government allows employees to take extra time off for childcare and SARS prevention.  
-Rugby team quarantined after playing in Hong Kong
- March 28: Hong Kong closes schools and imposes quarantine orders.
- March 29: New case of Singaporean women infected in Hong Kong.
- March 29: Screening for all at Changi begins, including the answering of mandatory questions
- March 29: Government asks for those with a fever to self- quarantine for 10 days.
- March 29: Government provides masks for all doctors.
- March 29: Chinese medical herb stores are running low on supplies; also, pharmacies running out of thermometers and masks.
- March 30: Taxi driver search begins.
- April 2: Tally begins in Straits Times.
- April 3: Ester Mok named as the super-infecter of 93 people.

**Communicating SARS in Singapore: Lessons**

**"Open" Communication**

- Frank honesty from officials is remarkably "healthy".
- It is OK to say that "fear" is a factor in decision-making.
- Compare Singapore's outbreak to Toronto's.
  
- Public health can be more successful in a nation that values the "community" over the individual.

**Questions this experience poses:**

- What are the criteria for assessing the potential of public harm?  
For what "problems" - SARS, agricultural terrorism, electrical blackouts, tooth decay?
- How do we consider the value of individual rights within the context of the public health measures?
- What funding (and from where) shall be provided for prevention?
- Is the US willing to challenge its political, social and corporate structures to make public health work?

*Notes provided by Stewart Auyash, edited by Sara Miller.*