

# Editor's comment

## SARS



An edition devoted entirely to the treatment of viral infections could possibly not be more timely with the spread of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) virus around the world.

Originally appearing in a remote province in China, SARS has been spread rapidly around the world by a few air travellers.

What is the causal agent? As yet, we are not entirely sure. A coronavirus is the prime suspect, and both *The Lancet* and the *New England Journal of Medicine* have fast-tracked articles detailing the history and clinical manifestations of the infection. They have also outlined guidelines for management. Further details and regular updates can be found on the CDC web site (<http://www.cdc.gov/>).

So far, molecular analysis has shown that the virus is genetically different from the two known human coronaviruses, as well as antigenically unrelated, meaning that there is no antibody cross-reactivity. The current hypothesis is that this newly identified coronavirus may have originated from an animal reservoir and crossed to humans. There are features of SARS that are consistent with a crossover from animal to human. As well as the serious respiratory symptoms, human infection with SARS is associated with severe systemic inflammatory damage, lymphopenia and thrombocytopenia. These associations are also found in avian influenza subtype H5N1.

But, pure science aside, the take-home message from this outbreak, which is far from over, is that public health is now a global issue. For some time now, virologists have been warning that a global pandemic of another virus, similar to the flu of 1918, is inevitable. These same authorities have also been warning that

there is no one country in the world which is truly prepared for this potential public health catastrophe.

We are fortunate that SARS spreads through relatively close contact, unlike the common influenza viruses. Even so, apparently there have been far more cases in China than previously admitted, leading to a belated apology from the Chinese authorities and the firing of two key people felt to be responsible for the cover-up.

The economic consequences of SARS are starting to be felt as air travel, already dented by the Iraq war, suffers further declines. The research continues, both to classify the virus and to prevent and treat it. SARS shows how vulnerable we all are to tricks of evolution; but also, encouragingly, how fast the global medical community can react in the face of such a threat.

**Bridget Farham**

## Reminder

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