

SARS virus identified, but the disease is still spreading

Jane Parry *Hong Kong*

As the epidemic of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) continues to defy attempts to bring it under control, Chinese officials have recorded far more cases in Beijing than previously admitted—a total of 455 cases, or more than 12 times the number previously revealed.

Until 20 April, officials said that there were only 37 cases in the capital, despite estimates by the World Health Organization that at least 200 people there had contracted SARS. The health minister, Zhang Wenkang, and the mayor of Beijing, Meng Xuenong, have been fired over the cover up.

The news came as scientists conclusively identified the cause of the syndrome as a coronavirus that is unlike any other known virus in the same family, animal or human. Research is ongoing to try to establish how long the newly named SARS virus can survive outside the

body, in what concentrations it appears in various body fluids, and at what point patients are the most infectious.

However, the information already gleaned about the SARS virus will help in the development of an accurate diagnostic test and antiviral drugs. A speedy test could be available by the end of this month, according to WHO, which coordinated the work of 13 laboratories around the world. "The pace of SARS research has been outstanding," said Dr David Heymann, WHO's executive director of communicable diseases. The work of the laboratories and WHO has been dedicated to Dr Carlo Urbani, the WHO scientist who first identified the virus in Hanoi and subsequently died of SARS.

According to WHO figures, by 21 April there were 3861 probable cases of SARS, with deaths in 26 countries—including

the revised numbers for cases in Beijing.

The virus has now spread to at least 16 provinces and municipalities in China. By 21 April, the number of probable cases in China stood at 1959 and the death toll was 92. Guangdong remains the worst affected area, with 1315 cases and 48 deaths recorded by 20 April. In Shanghai only two cases have been reported, but a WHO team went to the city on 21 April "to check on the numbers and see if the reporting system is reliable," said Peter Cordingley, WHO's spokesman in Manila.

WHO still advises against non-essential travel to Guangdong and Hong Kong, where the number of new cases continues to climb. From 15 April to 21 April there were an additional 212 new cases, bringing the total to 1402. There were 47 deaths that week (bringing the death toll

to 94), including 12 in one day; 17 of those who died were people who were neither elderly nor chronically ill. Health officials have announced that they will re-evaluate the treatment regimen of ribavirin and steroids.

The authorities in Singapore are still struggling to bring the situation under control there, with 178 cases recorded by 21 April. By that time, Vietnam had not reported any new SARS cases for over a week and was considering closing its border with China to prevent new cases from being imported.

Meanwhile in India, reports Sanjay Kumar from Delhi, four cases of SARS have been confirmed—one in Goa of a marine engineer who had sailed from Hong Kong to Mumbai but has now been cured and another three in a family in Pune one of whom had recently visited Indonesia. □

Canada reports more than 300 suspected cases of SARS

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

Canadian health officials fear that severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) might spread into the wider community, although those working in hospitals treating victims are at highest risk.

Speaking to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation on 21 April, Dr Jay Keystone of the University of Toronto's Centre of Travel and Tropical Medicine, said: "If we start to see increasing numbers [of cases not linked to hospitals, travel, and direct exposure to a SARS case], then I think we're going to have a very great difficulty in controlling this outbreak."

But he maintained that "while it's a danger ... I don't

think we're there yet."

On the same day, the federal health department said that it had received reports of 316 probable or suspected cases of SARS and 14 deaths in Canada. Ontario province reported 135 probable and 124 suspect cases. All 14 Canadian deaths probably or suspected to be linked to SARS were in Ontario. In addition, a 46 year old woman who died in the Philippines may have contracted the disease in Toronto, the Canadian city worst hit by SARS.

Other provinces reporting cases were British Columbia (four probable and 41 suspected cases); New Brunswick (two suspected); Saskatchewan (one sus-



Gowned and masked media workers are given a tour of Toronto's SARS clinic, which patients attend without having to visit their doctor

pected); Alberta (five suspected); and Prince Edward Island (four suspected).

Dr Keystone said the biggest danger of transmission was at hospitals where infected people have been treated.

Last weekend, Sunnybrook Hospital, one of Toronto's two major trauma centres, closed its SARS and critical care units when four staff members showed symptoms of the disease. □