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Editors sound the SARS alarm bells

Mediawatch: Lethal virus outbreaks may help sell newspapers but Bernard Dixon finds that the early response from journalists to the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) has been more informed than in many previous scares with diseases resulting from other dangerous viruses.

‘Does this virus have the power to conquer the whole world?’ was how the Daily Express flagged one of its first articles on the virus(es) responsible for severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). ‘As if war and terrorism were not enough, a terrified world now has a new threat to contend with — a mystery illness that is spreading around the world from the Orient,’ said the Daily Mail. ‘The symptoms are horrible, it can kill and there is no cure.’

Epidemics and emerging pathogens are invariable enticements for journalists, and the novel form of pneumonia which emerged in the Guangdong province of southern China last November was no exception. As cases later came to light in Hong Kong and further afield, unnecessary hyperbole became the most conspicuous media theme. Even a carefully balanced review in The Times was heralded by ‘The genie is out of the bottle’, ‘KILLER PNEUMONIA’ and a whole-page colour photograph of a masked and hooded man.

Yet a considered assessment of media coverage over the first weeks, as virologists sought to identify the causative agent(s) of SARS, revealed a less excitable tone overall. Indeed, the Daily Mirror’s headline ‘DON’T PANIC’ contrasted oddly with Science’s ‘Scientists chase fast-moving and deadly global illness’ and The Pharmaceutical Journal’s ‘SARS — a worldwide threat’.

As with the approach taken by The Times, it was often the images and headlines rather than the articles themselves that betokened alarm. One issue of the Daily Mail carried no less than four photographs of nine people wearing facemasks as they arrived at Heathrow airport from Hong Kong. Meanwhile The Times’s resident medico Thomas Stuttaford explained that such masks were unlikely to afford any significant protection. And Jeremy

Race to beat the bug

In a high-security London laboratory, scientists work around the clock to understand the killer Sars virus. Half a world away in a Singapore hospital, the victims fight for their lives. Jo Revill and John Aglionby report

Precautions: While the photographs of mask-clad figures in Hong Kong and other regions of the Far East have been dramatic, reports of the severe acute respiratory syndrome and the hunt for the virus causing it mostly managed to avoid arousing panic amongst their readers, as in this piece in the UK’s Observer earlier this month.
Laurance, despatched to the epicentre of the epidemic in Guangzhou, the provincial capital of Guangdong, found that no-one was wearing one.

The majority of journalists dealt with the underlying uncertainties of the story rather well. Using information from national laboratories and the World Health Organization, they reported the initial pinpointing of the causative agent as a paramyxovirus, the subsequent implication of a coronavirus and later suggestions that both organisms may be involved.

Even the identification techniques used, from simple morphology under the electron microscope to serology and sequence studies, were explained. So too were possible modes of spread, from initial assumptions of airborne transmission to later suspicions that direct person-to-person contact or fomites were more important.

Several newspapers and broadcasters also addressed practical issues likely to be of concern to their readers. They explained, for example, that the death rate was similar to that of influenza — but that elderly persons and those with heart, lung and other chronic conditions were at particular risk. Although no specific treatments were available, prompt hospitalisation, oxygen therapy and nursing care could save the lives of vulnerable individuals.

Less impressive were those newspaper, radio and TV correspondents who failed to distinguish between the disease and the organism(s) responsible for it. The Sun talked of ‘the killer bug SARS’. ‘Laboratories across the world renewed their efforts to identify the elusive virus known as SARS,’ said The Daily Telegraph. ‘The disease, since named SARS, is believed to be a virulent form of coronavirus — a lethal cousin of the common cold,’ said The Sunday Times.

Even more confusing was an article in The Independent on Sunday which told readers: ‘Experts are still puzzling over how SARS progresses. Some think it is a single coronavirus — a superstrong version of the common cold. But others are suggesting that SARS is a pair of viruses.’ To make matters worse, a later passage in the same article read: ‘Tests have been devised to test for the coronavirus: you can have it, yet not have SARS. And some people who have had SARS do not have any trace of the coronavirus.’

An unusual aspect of media coverage of the epidemic has been the many articles on its potential financial consequences. ‘Is the world economy in danger of catching a nasty cold from the deadly flu-like virus hitting Asia?’ asked The Independent. ‘Growth projections for key economies in the Pacific Rim are being slashed. Conferences, concerts and summits are being cancelled in growing numbers. The WHO has advised a ban on all non-essential travel to Hong Kong and China’s Guangdong province ... And at least one nation — Thailand — and one airline — KLM — have suggested that the impact of the virus could prove to be greater than that of the war in Iraq.’

One lesson from this still-incomplete story is the value to journalists of those centres and experts who have answered questions and speculated on the significance of the outbreak, rather than rejecting media demands as being unreasonable and inconvenient. The WHO press office, once a graveyard for journalistic enquiries, is now efficient and helpful. And authorities such as John Oxford in the UK have made themselves widely available for comments.

Contrast all of this with the hysteria that developed in Britain seven years ago when a ‘flesh-eating virus’ (actually a haemolytic Streptococcus pyogenes) was said to be ‘ramping around the country’ (it wasn’t), causing a condition called necrotising fasciitis that was both untreatable (it wasn’t) and hitherto unknown to medical science (it wasn’t). On that occasion, part of the blame could be laid at the doors of those organisations which were so repelled by the sensational fashion in which the media were covering the story that they disappeared into the long grass (Current Biology (1996) 6, 493).

Their reticence was at least one reason why these and other media errors appeared not just once but repeatedly over a whole week. This time, with a genuinely new and threatening organism to deal with, all sides have done a far better job.

Bernard Dixon is the European editor for the American Association of Microbiology.

US model pushed for UK managers

Welcome budget increases are promised for Britain’s science base but, according to a new report, the country’s research managers need a new approach if they are to make the best use of any increased resources. Nigel Williams reports.

Britain’s science base faces one of the rosiest funding futures in Europe with promised government boosts in spending but a new report argues that there are major problems with the senior management of the funds and that the US offers a better model of how things should be done.

The report, commissioned by the Centre for Policy Studies in London accuses the Department of Trade and Industry, the ministry in charge of the science budget, and its Office of Science and Technology of weak management, and claims the new Research Councils UK (RCUK) strategy group lacks power.

The report raises questions about how the DTI will manage its increased science budget, which is set to rise from £2 billion this year to almost £3 billion in 2005–6. The report claims there is no real analysis of how science funding is used and whether it is used successfully.

“Britain’s science is in a poor state. This is not because our