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Published a year after the devastating SARS outbreak in Hong Kong—described by some as Hong Kong’s 9/11—this book takes a look at various different aspects of the 21st century’s first new infectious disease. What actually happened in those first few weeks as the epidemic unfolded?

As the chapters progress, it becomes clear that “SARS represented more than a medical challenge” for Hong Kong, and although epidemiological aspects of the disease are examined, much more space is devoted to the economic impact, the political challenge SARS posed, actions taken by the WHO, the effect on the community, and the context in which the disease struck.

Presented as a series of essays written by 16 contributors, ranging from professors of medicine to travel journalists, each chapter has its own style. The book opens with a diary documenting the progression of the SARS outbreak, from mainland China to Hong Kong and around the world. Early chapters include some moving pathos and drama-laden personal accounts, and provide a stark contrast with later chapters, which are much more matter of fact. Individual experiences are highlighted: from Dr Gregory Chen who contracted SARS himself, to Professor Malik Peiris’ quest to find the virus causing the disease. SARS is, after all, a story that touched everyday lives.

As the title suggests, the spotlight is put on Hong Kong, although comparisons to the SARS outbreaks in other countries are given where appropriate. The media coverage of the disease in Hong Kong is contrasted with that in Toronto where a much less polemic attitude was taken, reflecting both cultural differences and the circumstances of the outbreaks. The N95 facemask on the front cover of the book became the symbol of SARS in Hong Kong, where it was considered an indication to the outside world that precautions were being taken; in Toronto wearing a mask was regarded as an overreaction and far less people wore them.

The SARS epidemic raised important questions about public health, such as what kinds of surveillance systems are needed to alert people to emerging infections within days when a new disease arrives, and how can direct evidence of the trajectory of a new disease be obtained? These types of question, the authors point out, “may not have the same popular appeal as the microbiological detective stories of the discovery of the SARS coronavirus, or the apparent immediacy of developing a vaccine, but are nonetheless crucial in the control of any epidemic.”

Most revealing is the political context of the Hong Kong outbreak. The authors launch a scathing attack on Tung’s presidency (the president of Hong Kong). Much heavy criticism is levelled at China, who initially denied the extent of the outbreak there and where traditional secrecy still shrouds many decisions made. Limited flow of information between Hong Kong and China as a consequence of the “one country, two systems” policy, in operation since the handover from British colonial to Chinese rule in 1997, is blamed for Hong Kong’s lack of preparation for the epidemic. Hong Kong was not alerted to the problems facing neighbouring Guangdong until it was too late. But interestingly, the authors assert that “SARS may have been the best thing that has happened to Hong Kong and China for a very long time” in terms of forcing China to open up.

The range of different authors and styles has the advantage of making each chapter a refreshing new read; however, this approach inevitably also generates a lot of repetition as the same facts are looked at from a new angle. The book succeeds in painting a compelling picture of how SARS affected Hong Kong, from medical staff, to sufferers, from businessmen to politicians, although the fact that all the authors have strong links with Hong Kong also lends quite a bias to the book. And why shouldn’t they – they are the ones with first-hand experience, and using an assortment of authors from different professions goes some way to restoring the balance.

The book is most insightful in its treatment of the legacy SARS left Hong Kong, not just in global terms of alerting the world to the emergence of new infectious diseases but in the way SARS has highlighted the city’s strengths and also its weaknesses. Some questions remain unanswered but lessons have been learned and should be heeded in future, as it is not a matter of if but when the next global epidemic will occur.

A comprehensive collection of essays, this book would appeal to anyone who is interested in a behind-the-scenes view of what went on during the Hong Kong outbreak, and the lasting effect that SARS has had on the city. Even those with previous knowledge of this subject will find new nuggets of information here.

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