

# SARS – A Fast Moving Infectious Disease

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In many countries all over the globe public health authorities are trying to cope with the acute threat of a rapidly spreading infectious disease. The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) has become a term, that is familiar to most people worldwide. Its spread has had a major impact on the economy in many countries and on the business outlook of several industries such as airlines and the travel industry.

The dynamics of the outbreak, the associated mortality and the apparent ease of spread made a quick and appropriate response crucial for public health authorities and hospitals in order to implement precautionary measures. However, as very little was known during the first weeks about the characteristics of the microorganism that causes SARS, such measures had to be based on comparatively little scientifically established information and on recommendations of various national and international organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Atlanta, USA) and the World Health Organization (Geneva, Switzerland).

The SARS-crisis was managed in many places with the help of information that was retrieved from the world wide web. Using these resources was key to the successful preparation of many hospitals. The internet was also used for the dissemination of various guidelines and recommendations by local authorities. Finally, the first original reports describing the epidemiological and clinical features of the first series of patients in Hong Kong and Toronto were published electronically in record time [1–3]. The reports describing a novel coronavirus in patients with SARS also appeared quickly in the electronic versions of reputed scientific journals [4–6]. It is understandable that the peer review process had to be suspended in order to get this important information published quickly. It is possible that some statements will have to be modified as more information becomes available.

Nevertheless, the magnitude of the SARS problem justifies this approach. As we are living in a very global world with a lot of mobility, local threats may easily turn into international crises. The containment of such problems as the SARS problem will only be possible through swift and com-

prehensive reaction. This reaction has a better chance of achieving success if it is based on good information. We must use all valuable sources of information. The internet is certainly taking center stage in this regard. The ongoing SARS problem illustrates the importance of the world wide web for the infectious diseases specialist.

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