



IDEAS & OPINION

SARS reaction greater than the real threat

By Dr. MARC SIEGEL

When President Bush granted the secretary of health and human services the right to quarantine SARS victims last week, he gave another nudge to a trend that is spreading panic around the globe.

Bush is hardly alone. In its more than 50 years of existence, the World Health Organization has never before issued a travel advisory and enacted a global surveillance network, as it has now with severe acute respiratory syndrome. In the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is publicly analyzing every conceivable case — another unprecedented reaction.

SARS is a legitimate concern, but the response has been carried to an extreme. The virus has infected about 2,000 people worldwide and killed fewer than 100. Flu kills 20,000 to 30,000 people in the U.S. every year.

What is going on medically? The answer is complex, since the SARS virus seems to be a cousin to the common cold, which, as we all know, spreads easily. The great difference is that the cold virus is countered by most people's immune systems, while there seems to be no natural defense against SARS.

So, on the surface, a strong response would seem right. And as Dr. Julie Gerberding, director of the CDC, pointed out in the *New England Journal of Medicine* last week, the international scientific cooperation in identifying the corona virus as the probable culprit in a matter of weeks has been impressive.

But Gerberding didn't stop with the scientists. She wrote: "Even more impressive than the speed of scientific discovery in the global SARS outbreak is the almost instantaneous communication and information exchange that has supported every aspect of the response."

Sorry, but that's wrong. The result of all this communication has been global panic and economic shutdown way out of proportion to the real threat.

The problem may be that the CDC is struggling to recover from the public lambasting it took over its sluggish handling of the anthrax mailings in 2001.

As I pointed out to the Senate Finance Committee at the time, the problem was more one of poor interagency cooperation than the CDC's fault alone.

Nevertheless, the CDC — known on Capitol Hill as the Rodney Dangerfield of federal agencies — has struggled to put on a new face. Gerberding, who replaced the previous director, is giving speeches and granting press conferences at an unprecedented rate. The CDC now looks more responsible, but all this public posturing is taking SARS out of its proper context and causing a scare that ultimately may do more harm than the virus itself.

The World Health Organization, which has never gotten involved in global tracking strategies before, also is weighing in heavily on SARS. Perhaps this is because of improved technology, greater scientific cooperation and an increased interest in tracking infectious agents because of concern over possible bioterrorism.

But the organization isn't used to the spotlight, so it is not considering sufficiently how its actions are perceived by the public. There is too much emphasis on public statements and not enough on doing serological testing, working with local doctors and testing antiviral therapies.

Panic over this virus is public health run amok. SARS needs to be cured with laboratory work, not press conferences.

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