

New diseases have been emerging at the unprecedented rate of one a year for the last two decades, and this trend is certain to continue. The sudden and deadly arrival of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) - the first new disease of this millennium on the global health stage early in 2003 was, in some way, perhaps the most dramatic of all. It rapidly achieved notoriety through outbreaks in Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China, Viet Nam, Singapore and Canada as a readily transmissible infectious disease with a significant mortality rate (around 11%) and global economic consequences.

The outbreaks in early 2003 spanning 30 countries in six continents, and which caused estimated losses to the countries of \$30 to \$150 billion, were controlled by July 2003.

The rapid containment of SARS is one of the biggest success stories in public health in recent years. It is proof of the power of international collaboration and transparency in sharing information.

Several lessons were learnt from the epidemic:

- In the world today an infectious disease in one country is a threat to all: infectious diseases do not respect international borders;
- Emerging infectious disease outbreaks have a tremendous negative economic impact on trade, travel and tourism;
- Infectious disease outbreaks reveal weaknesses in public health infrastructure;
- Even in the absence of a curative drug and a preventive vaccine, emerging infections can be contained with high-level government commitment, strengthening of epidemiological and public health services, and through international and intercountry collaboration;
- Communication with the public, media and other stakeholders is a key element;
- Global partnerships and rapid sharing of data/information enhances preparedness and response, and
- WHO and other international technical agencies can play a critical role in catalyzing international cooperation and support.