



# The Whiff of Something Brewing

**D**r Jiten Sen was practising in a walk-in clinic in Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) when the SARS epidemic broke loose in March 2003. Dr Sen, currently a GP in private practice, recalls his eventful experience in the TTSH clinic, which also catered to hospital staff, and how his professional involvement in the SARS hot zone adversely affected his personal life.

## **The whiff of something brewing**

**SMA:** Could you recount your time working in the TTSH clinic just before the SARS outbreak?

**Dr Jiten Sen – JS:** There was a rumour of something happening in Guangzhou (in China), that was later appearing in Hong Kong. It had no name and was designated as atypical pneumonia at best at that time. There was some awareness of it, so there were probably some travel advisories to Hong Kong, and probably, from Hong Kong for us.

So this elderly woman, who pushed the food trolleys at TTSH, came into the staff clinic hacking and coughing away. I requested a chest X-ray, and it was a bizarre-looking chest X-ray. Fluffy white stuff everywhere!

**SMA:** Was she from Hong Kong?

**JS:** She was Singaporean, a permanent TTSH staff working in the kitchen. They ran their trolleys from the subterranean level called Basement 1. There was already screening stations for the hospital staff at the entrance and atrium. How it worked at the staff clinic was that all patients requiring admission had to be admitted through the A&E department.

**SMA:** At that time, was there a whiff of something scary starting to happen, as in, an unknown epidemic?

**JS:** There was, there was. The whiff was there. The whiff, as I recall, was that there was something brewing in Guangzhou which was entering Hong Kong, and Hong Kong was trying to understand and come to grips with it. There were reports of people there falling very ill from pneumonia. Then we were trying to control the flow of people from Hong Kong.

By that time, the whiff was so strong that all the hospitals (in Singapore) set up dedicated stations to screen all employees and visitors. This was just before all the hospitals went into shutdown mode. At the staff clinic, another two or three cases appeared, again from nonmedical TTSH staff who could have been cleaners or from the food galley crew.

**SMA:** Did you send the first patient from the food galley to TTSH A&E?

**JS:** I duly referred her to the A&E.

**SMA:** And she was discharged after that?

**JS:** You don't know, they never tell you. There was no feedback from the A&E or the hospital. I think she was admitted; there was a contact number to call for these cases. I can't remember who I spoke to when I highlighted this first case; it was readily dismissed as her exposure was considered minimal. To be fair, the learning curve for the authorities with regard to SARS was in its infancy. She was probably the most sick but I think there were two or three more.

Photos: Nipic.com and SMA

The advisory came out: all the doctors or healthcare professionals, who had come into contact with these cases, were to go on leave for a mandatory 30 days of home quarantine. I brought up that I had been exposed to these three cases, but they told me that my exposure was minimal so I did not qualify. *(laughs)*

**SMA:** You weren't wearing a mask or any personal protective equipment (PPE) when you saw them?

**JS:** No, it was essentially a GP clinic. Three days later, they shut down TTSH and all access points.

**SMA:** So the TTSH staff clinic was closed when the hospital shut down?

**JS:** Absolutely. That clinic was not really a staff clinic. It was a walk-in clinic, but part of the deal was that you would look after the staff.

Then they needed a doctor to run the staff clinic at National University Hospital (NUH), but that was all gown and mask, PPE style. I was asked to do that, so off I went.

**SMA:** So was the first patient you saw actually proven to have SARS?

**JS:** I have no follow-up details about her but I'm certain she was a SARS patient. Her chest X-ray was so unlike anything I had ever seen before, in terms of a pneumonia-like picture.

**SMA:** As in the "fluffy stuff"?

**JS:** All the fluffy stuff, almost like pneumoconiosis.

**SMA:** Could she have come into contact with the super-spreader in TTSH?

**JS:** It's quite possible. These food galley people also serve the food with those huge trolleys to the patients.

### **An unusual and surreal time**

**SMA:** How did you feel during that entire period of time?

**JS:** The only thing I was peeved about was that I think I should have been qualified for the 30-day quarantine, to be honest. *(laughs)* I wouldn't have minded the break. The names were all listed on Teletext, but alas, my name wasn't there. So I agreed to be redeployed to the NUH staff clinic.

**SMA:** That was quite an unusual and surreal time. After work, were there any extra instructions given to those of

you in the front line? Could you just go home and play golf and do everything normally?

**JS:** Like all things, everybody thinks that everybody is on top of everything but no one really understands anything. They think, "Oh your PPE suit is good, so that's it."

**SMA:** What did people think when they knew you were working in the TTSH clinic then? Did any of your friends or golfing buddies know you were in TTSH?

**JS:** Oh yeah, of course, they avoided me. The amazing thing was how irrationally "death conscious" some people became. I had many ups and downs but I'm not one for remembering negativity. I wasn't allowed to go to people's homes for dinner. I have always enjoyed home cooked meals over eating out, but because of the alienation, the social ostracism went on for as long as a year.

**SMA:** There was stigmatisation?

**JS:** Yes, there was no heroism attached to it. It was not like I was forced to go to NUH and work. I was asked and I said sure. You just feel like you're doing some National Service, contributing if you will.

Another example of irrational fear was related to my father. My father regularly played mahjong most afternoons, but he was forbidden from joining his friends because of me. Needless to say, he too was unwelcome socially for a while.

### **Post-SARS**

**SMA:** Were you recognised for your work in the front line of the war against SARS?

**JS:** I think at the end of the ordeal post-SARS, I got a medal, and if I'm not mistaken, \$500 from then President S R Nathan.

**SMA:** That was the Courage Medal, awarded by The Courage Fund.

**JS:** You know I'm not into awards; I didn't pay it much regard. I think it was sent to me.

**SMA:** A certain number of Courage Medals were given to each hospital. So that's good, at least they recognised you. We thought you were unsung, but you were actually a little bit "sung".

**JS:** Off tune! *(laughs)* **SMA**