

The Making of the SARS Webcast

The SARS outbreak prevented the gathering of large numbers of health care workers. The concern was, should a cluster of infection occur during such a gathering, the large number of critical personnel being quarantined would cripple the already over-stretched health care service. Still, there was an urgent need to reach out to the doctors to rally them to stand firm in the fight against SARS. The College therefore organized a live webcast on the 24th May 2003. A panel of physician leaders were invited to discuss lessons learned and to answer questions from viewers. The panelists were:

- Prof Tan Chorh Chuan, Director of Medical Services, Ministry of Health
- Dr Lily Neo, Member of Parliament and Chairperson, Government Parliamentary Committee on Health
- Dr Tan Cheng Bock, Member of Parliament and Veteran Family Physician
- Dr Leo Yee Sin, Clinical Director, Communicable Disease Centre, Tan Tock Seng Hospital
- A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean, President College of Family Physicians Singapore
- A/Prof Goh Lee Gan, Associate Professor, Family Medicine Division, National University of Singapore
- Dr. Lee Kheng Hock, Executive Director, College of Family Physicians Singapore

The event was sponsored by Merck Sharp & Dohme (I.A.)Corp. Singapore Branch, StarHub and ST Teleport. It was estimated that more than 1000 doctors watched this historic first live webcast for doctors.

Behind the Scenes

The College Mirror interviewed Dr Lee Kheng Hock, Honorary Secretary of College to find out what went into the making of the event.

CM: During the webcast, your co-moderator, Prof Goh Lee Gan referred to you as the "brains" behind the webcast. Can you tell us how this webcast came about?

Dr. Lee: Yes, the SARS outbreak is not too long ago and we are already beginning to forget what it was like when it was raging all around us. I think it was towards the end of April when I met up with Mr Felix Soh from MSD who wanted to know how they can help doctors during this difficult period. They have heard that the College was working on an e-

learning project and quite wisely concluded that e-learning was an ideal solution for CME during the outbreak. The trouble really was



From Left : A/Prof Goh L G, Dr Lee K H, A/Prof Cheong P Y, Dr Leo Y S, Dr Tan C B, Dr Lily Neo, Dr Tan C C

that, the e-learning project was still on the drawing board. We came to the conclusion that a webcast would be an ideal way to rally doctors who were all stressed to their limit of endurance - physically, emotionally and financially. The challenge was how to get everything going at the drop of a hat and on a shoe-string budget.

CM: So, how much did it cost to bring about the making of webcast?

Dr Lee: MSD was very generous and agreed to allocate \$15,000 for the webcast and another \$15,000 for an e-learning module on SARS. It was a very altruistic gesture on the part of MSD. I later found out that just engaging the vendor to record the live webcast would use up this amount.

I approached Mr Philip Tan from Star Hub and asked him for technical advice on how to get a webcast going from scratch. Not only did he give me a free tutorial on webcast technology, he referred me to his colleagues and after a few last minute meetings, Star Hub agreed to underwrite the cost of the connection and bandwidth, which I understand amounted to between \$20,000 to \$30,000. They introduced me to Mr Wee Way Kiat of ST Teleport who immediately agreed to lend the use of their state-of-the-art studio, free of charge.

It was really heart-warming to see this outpouring of support for the healthcare workers during the outbreak. This is something we can be proud of as Singaporeans. In time of crisis, the community spirit was very strong.

After securing funding and the technical resources, the three weeks to the broadcast date was a blur of frenzied activity. *I never*

knew there was so much work involved in a live webcast. We had many sleepless nights wondering whether we can pull it off without a

major disaster.

CM: Now that you have caught up with some sleep...what are your feelings about being involved in this historic first webcast?

Dr Lee: ...A sense of loss. For our fallen comrades, some of whom I know personally, the void will always be there. But also a nagging sense of loss of opportunity.

CM: Why that sense of loss?

Dr Lee: Well, it was a time of unprecedented comradeship and co-operation amongst healthcare workers. Before SARS, we all keep hearing about the need for competition and how competition makes everything better. While that is true, the price we paid was diminishing co-operation and the depletion of social capital within the medical profession. The SARS outbreak demonstrated the importance of co-operation in health care, both internationally and within the country.

At that time, I remember being approached by a senior doctor in a group practice. He was very concerned that the solo GPs out there did not have the necessary logistic backup and the peer support to sustain them. He asked me whether there are ways he can help them. Another group of solo GPs were discussing how to set up neighbourhood networks where doctors can cover for one another if one should fall ill or need to be quarantined. *There were no longer concerns of market share and competitive advantage. We were all doctors on the same side trying our best to do our work.* Now that the intensity of outbreak is over, I notice everything seems to be going back to "business as usual". And that (emphasis) ... will be a loss of opportunity to make changes for better in our medical profession.