Lecture by

Mrs. Anson Chan, GBM, GCMG, CBE, JP.,
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SARS: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Vice-Chancellor, Professor Jim, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an honour and a pleasure for me as a HKU alumnus to launch this first series of Distinguished Alumni Lectures in celebration of the Faculty of Arts’ 90th Anniversary. In the light of all that we have been through over the last three months, I cannot think of a more pertinent subject to speak on then the one suggested by the Dean and his colleagues, that is on SARS – the acronym for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. I do not intend to dwell on facts and statistics. Rather I would like to examine its social and political implications and to take an imperfect look forward.
SARS struck Hong Kong with little warning in March. So far this deadly virus has exacted a heavy price in terms of human suffering, lives and economic loss. The Government has come under fire over its initial response. It is of course easy to be wise after the event. We all know that hindsight is 20:20 vision. But in the early days of this new and unknown disease and given the need to balance different considerations, not least that of avoiding public panic, it is perhaps understandable why the Government took the stance that it did. This has clearly been a steep learning curve for all. But what matters is that the authorities soon came to grips with the problem and the virus now appears to be contained albeit with a heavy loss of lives. But it is too early to celebrate. We must remain vigilant and continue to take sensible precautions. Various reviews are now in hand to see what lessons can be learnt and how we can be better prepared to deal with future outbreaks of infectious diseases.

Infectious diseases are not new to Hong Kong. In the early part of the last century, we have had to overcome diseases such as tuberculosis and cholera. So successful have we been that for many decades, Hong Kong has enjoyed a standard of public health that is the envy of many countries in the region. We have forgotten what it is like to have to cope with sudden outbreaks of infectious diseases. SARS has been a rude awakening call and there is little doubt that we have been caught unprepared. With globalization, our close proximity to the mainland where so many live in close contact with poultry and animals, and with the propensity of viruses to mutate, no country or territory, least of all Hong Kong can take its public health for granted. We have to work hard at maintaining public health but we can only achieve lasting results if there is a concerted push and a genuine partnership between Government and all sectors of the community. We also need the co-operation of other countries, particularly that of our own mainland since our two economies are now so intertwined. Every day, there are huge cross border movements of people and goods. The economic benefits we derive are substantial but we must also recognize the risks to public health that such movements pose. Infectious diseases do not recognize boundaries.

The way in which our community as a whole has faced up to the SARS outbreak exemplifies in my view all that is best about our society. Indeed it captures the very essence of the Hong Kong spirit-unflinching courage and composure in the face of the unknown; regard for the wider good as reflected in the wide compliance with quarantine orders whatever the personal sacrifice and inconvenience, compassion for those who have died or who have suffered the loss of
loved ones, and a ready willingness to dig deep into one’s pockets or to help by volunteering services. Above all our doctors and front line health workers have displayed the highest professional commitment in looking after those afflicted with the virus even at the expense of their own lives. Our civil servants have worked long hours carrying out the necessary inspections, disinfecting premises, helping residents to cope with quarantine restrictions, etc., etc., etc. Our NGOs have also shouldered willingly their share of the burden. The overall community response has been selfless and spontaneous and has involved people from all walks of life, irrespective of race, religion or creed. SARS has united our community in a common cause and focused human endeavours both on countering the disease and coping with its consequences whether social or economic. I salute our many sung and unsung heroes. It makes me very proud to be a part of the Hong Kong community.

Now that the immediate danger appears to be over, we must take careful stock of what has happened in order to chart our way forward. I have to say that for a territory that aspires to be a world-class city, our environmental cleanliness and standard of personal hygiene is distinctly third-world. This cannot be allowed to continue. We need a fundamental change of mind-set and a concerted community effort to clean up our act. We cannot begin to make progress until there is wide acceptance that public health is the responsibility of every citizen, starting with our personal hygiene. No Government can be expected to shoulder the entire responsibility. The devastation wrought by SARS should bring home the message that there can be no wealth without health. As someone once said “The poorest man would not part with health for money. But the richest would gladly part with all their money for health.”

The Government’s Team Clean under the chairmanship of the Chief Secretary should be commended for expeditiously putting together a package of measures to clean up Hong Kong and to ensure that it stays that way. I believe these are steps in the right direction. However, to achieve lasting results and to change entrenched bad habits, we need to pay particular attention to the following:

• Education particularly of the very young so that they acquire the right habits at a young age. In this we should learn from Japan and Western advanced countries;
• Heavy penalties for littering, spitting and other anti-social behavior;
• Consistent and sustained enforcement of the law. If necessary, the powers given to law enforcement agencies should be strengthened;
• A thorough review of our Building Code to ensure that all new buildings, particularly residential buildings, incorporate adequate sanitary standards. The Code must then be strictly enforced;
• Proper and regular maintenance of residential buildings to ensure safety and public health;
• A programme to deal with defective sanitary fittings and facilities in existing residential buildings;
• A more vigorous look at our entire food chain to minimise any future risks to public health. In this context, we need to seriously consider prohibiting the future importation of live poultry and to deal resolutely with its fall-out.

I said earlier on that making Hong Kong a cleaner and healthier place to live and work in must be a community effort. One of the best ways to do this is to devolve more responsibility onto our District Councils. Our 18 District Councils cover the entire territory and properly funded and staffed, and working in concert with the relevant professional departments, they are in the best position to perform the much needed role of watch-dogs. Healthy competition amongst the District Councils to keep their districts clean will also provide an added impetus. At the Government level, there must be a multi-disciplinary approach to tackling black spots and protecting public health so that the work does not fall between two stools.

In the political context, it seems to me that the Government cannot be faulted for the open and transparent manner in which it has disseminated information on SARS. Indeed it was Hong Kong who first notified and therefore alerted the WHO to the existence of a new killer infectious disease, thus enabling the organization to take timely action to prevent the spread of the virus. This openness testifies to the virtue and health of our civil institutions – institutions that encourage transparency and a free and vigilant press. It is in times like this that we come to appreciate even more how vital it is to nurture and protect our civil institutions.

Whilst it is true that health begins at home, we must also recognize that what happens in the mainland health wise will also have an impact here and vice versa. If we think we have a difficult task in Hong Kong, that difficulty is multiplied manifold given the size and spread of our country, its huge population and its current stage of economic, social and political development. All these underline the need for us to establish at the earliest opportunity an effective cross border forum that will bring together officials and health experts from both sides to discuss health issues, improve date collection, share intelligence and devise practical solutions to common health problems. Both sides have a common interest in protecting the health of our communities and preventing the spread
of infectious diseases but we will only achieve results if there is complete openness and transparency. The decisive action recently taken by Central Government leaders sends a strong signal that cover-ups will not be tolerated. Nevertheless, given our different culture and style of operation, we should not underestimate the difficulties involved. Too much is at stake here for all parties. We cannot afford to fail.

In so far as our hospitals are concerned, the fact that so many of our medical staff and front line health workers were struck down by SARS suggests that existing facilities and systems are inadequate to prevent or at least reduce the risk of cross infections. No doubt the Review Committee under the chairmanship of the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food will be examining this aspect, amongst others, to see what lessons can be learnt. A great deal will be expected from this Committee. It is unfortunate that even before the Committee has begun its work, serious doubts have already been raised as to its credibility. I do not question the integrity of Dr. E.K. Yeoh but it is clear that the public would have much preferred the appointment of an independent leading member of the community to head up the Review Committee. Now that a decision has been made, we should give the Committee a chance to prove its worth by the thoroughness of its work and the soundness of its conclusions and recommendations. We have an impressive list of outside experts, both locally and from overseas, and it is hardly fair to impugn their integrity at the outset. Amongst the many issues that the Committee will be looking at, I hope that it will consider the following:

- A command structure that can swing quickly into action in a crisis situation and which places responsibility squarely on one single public health authority that will be empowered to act with all the available medical and health resources and facilities (including those in the private sector) at his or her disposal;
- Strengthening our research, data collection and intelligence gathering capability including adequate training for the relevant staff; and
- The provision of isolation facilities whether as a stand-alone facility or as part of a standard hospital to protect both patients and staff from the risk of cross infections.
In looking forward, I want to remind everyone of Hong Kong’s strengths:

- the discipline and good sense of our citizens;
- the resilience of our public health system;
- the dedication and selflessness of our medical and support staff;
- the commitment of our civil servants;
- our openness and transparency;
- our effective surveillance and contact tracing infrastructure.

The last is greatly strengthened by our close collaboration with WHO and health authorities and research laboratories throughout the world. We are very well regarded by those bodies. It is a standing that we have earned through our past efforts, more recently in tackling the three outbreaks of avian flu. We therefore have a firm foundation to build on.

SARS has dealt a heavy blow to Hong Kong but it is not a mortal blow. We can recover from its devastation if we all pull in the same direction. We must make it our personal commitment to raise our standard of personal hygiene and environmental cleanliness. We must have zero tolerance for spitting, littering, dirty back lanes, faulty drain pipes, unhygienic restaurants and filthy public toilets and the like. We must aim high so that we can demonstrate to the rest of the world that we truly deserve to be called a world-class city.

Much hard work lies ahead. Now is not the time for finger pointing, witch hunting, partisan politics, misplaced loyalties, professional jealousies or empty rhetoric and slogans. We must concentrate our energy on honest soul searching, constructive collaboration and concrete and sustained action that will make a lasting difference to this place that we all call home. Some of the measures being mooted by the Government may well prove unpopular, particularly those that will change our eating preferences and habits. The Government, hopefully supported by our legislature, must have the political will to see through the necessary measures in the overall public interest. We cannot afford another damp squid. It is now or never.

In conclusion, SARS should be a humbling experience for us all. Not only should it remind us of our own mortality but it should convince us that united we will conquer, divided we will fall. Ironically, SARS has provided a rare rallying point. Our Government would do well to harness the good will and energies that have been generated. Our people have risen magnificently to the challenge. Our Government can do no less.
I am reminded of Martin Luther King’s words:

“Every crisis has both its dangers and opportunities. Each can spell either salvation or doom.”

We look to our Government to take the lead in transforming our harrowing experience into an opportunity to bring our people together and to restore harmony to our society. Our current imperfect constitutional framework to a large extent makes the art of governing even more difficult than it usually is. In the absence of the checks and balances provided by a fully-fledged democracy, it is incumbent upon our Government to deal even-handedly with the different forces within our community, whatever their political persuasion. Cohesion can be achieved if Government is willing to include all, excluding none. We thrive on diversity of opinion. It is a healthy and natural feature of any open civilized society. It is for our Government to seek common ground for the greatest public good. Let there be enlightened leadership so that together we can face the many challenges ahead.

Acknowledgements

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