

RTHK 'Viewpoint' – 8 April 2003.
by John Batten

My mother was usually blasé about sickness – a concerned and caring nurse, but always realistic. I remember many school holidays spent with our family uprooted and ensconced in strange geriatric hospitals while my mother acted as a relief Matron. I hated it: old people, many wonderfully friendly but embarrassingly doting, and the smell; the smell - what I later realised to be 'terminality'. I suppose, death.

I am also blasé about sickness. I grew up with one of those family stories told on dire occasions that I had nearly died of German Measles in a serious outbreak in the early 1960s. And I only – absurdly - learnt the power of antibiotics when with a severe dose of chickenpox as a teenager the doctor prescribed an antibiotic which, happily as a side-effect, cured the biggest pimple I had ever had.

The Department of Health's information on SARS is interesting: moderate language and sensible advice given - and the reports by, for example, the *South China Morning Post's* Dr Margaret Cheng are similar – sensible medical advice applicable to any influenza-type infection. There is no talk of using masks or isolating yourself from other people.... However, individual reactions to such developments as the Department of Health quarantine rules have seen absurd responses: the security guards outside one of the Lantau Island isolation camps for Amoy Gardens residents covered in protection gear more fitting of a chemical spillage and the photograph of a healthy masked Donald Tsang are not in keeping with the sensible Department of Health guidelines.

The paranoia associated with SARS is embarrassing. Each to their own opinion, but sorry, SARS is not an epidemic. Microbiologists and virologists are waiting to tell us 'we told you so' with their Doomsday-like predictions; but they are premature. This is not the big one. The reaction by healthy, strong people - surrounded by a host of Western medical support - is a total over-reaction.

I suggest some moral and physical courage from all of us – led by government and business leaders: as a first step - be rational and get your masks off!

But, if you think that is big news forget it. The death of Leslie Cheung is actually bigger. Much bigger.

His funeral was today and if you want to find the big one, the big turning point for Hong Kong – then, Leslie Cheung's suicide could be it.

The good days are definitely over. The clichés and rhetoric and facile image-making that government and big business often deliberately use in Hong Kong will have little edge now. Leslie Cheung's Icarus-like jump will symbolise this city's fall back to reality – I just wonder, however, if we have the leadership with the moral and physical courage to be honest, for once.

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