

## THIS WEEK'S TOPIC:

Are businesses in Singapore better prepared now in the event of another Sars-like outbreak and, if so, why?  
More broadly, what has changed to make Singapore better prepared for a wide-scale medical epidemic?

# Being battle-ready for any epidemic

**Dumont Jean-Michel**  
Chairman  
Ruder Finn Asia

WE have learnt from Sars that communication is at the heart of managing an epidemic. With an increasingly connected world, people expect immediacy when receiving information. If communication is not managed well, it will result in undue panic and the stakeholders not being adequately prepared for such situations. Public health officials and communications professionals have now learnt to trust each other and work hand in hand to ensure transparency – that information flow is accurate, easy to understand and disseminated in a timely and effective way – so that the situation and public expectations are managed.

**Subbaraju Alluri**  
CEO  
Grey Singapore

THE Sars episode of 2003 was a stark reminder of the fragility of human mortality, and how a large medical epidemic can affect everyone. Businesses across all industries – from healthcare to travel and retail were affected. It had a profound effect on the healthcare system and overall community. A decade later, Singapore's healthcare system – as well as other businesses – has learnt from the harrowing experience and is better equipped to face a similar situation should it happen. Today, there are measures put in place to restrict the outbreak of any epidemic. For example, most hospitals today require visitor registration for tracking purposes. There are also now close to 400 isolation rooms in most public hospitals, an increase from the past, and more infectious-disease physicians to treat patients should a similar incident occur. We must remain vigilant and not take good health and a safe environment for granted. Businesses should always have a contingency plan in the event of a medical epidemic in ensuring continuity and productivity, and stay mindful of employees' health.

**Liu Chunlin**  
CEO  
K&C Protective Technologies Pte Ltd

WITH all the lessons learnt 10 years ago, Singapore is in a much better position to combat another round of wide-scale medical epidemic like the outbreak of H7N9, the latest bird flu virus found in China. First of all, Singapore has increased resources, such as isolation facilities in hospitals, since 2003. New health advisory policies that include seniors aged 65 years and older, those with chronic diseases, children and teenagers, as well as women in pregnancy, have been in place since 2005. On top of that, Singapore has set up a priority plan outlining who will be the first to get anti-viral drugs in case of another outbreak. With better preparation, proper methodology and more education plans for the public in general, Singapore and its business sector are in a much better shape should another Sars-like outbreak take place.

**Dora Hoan**  
Co-Chairman/Group CEO  
Best World International Ltd

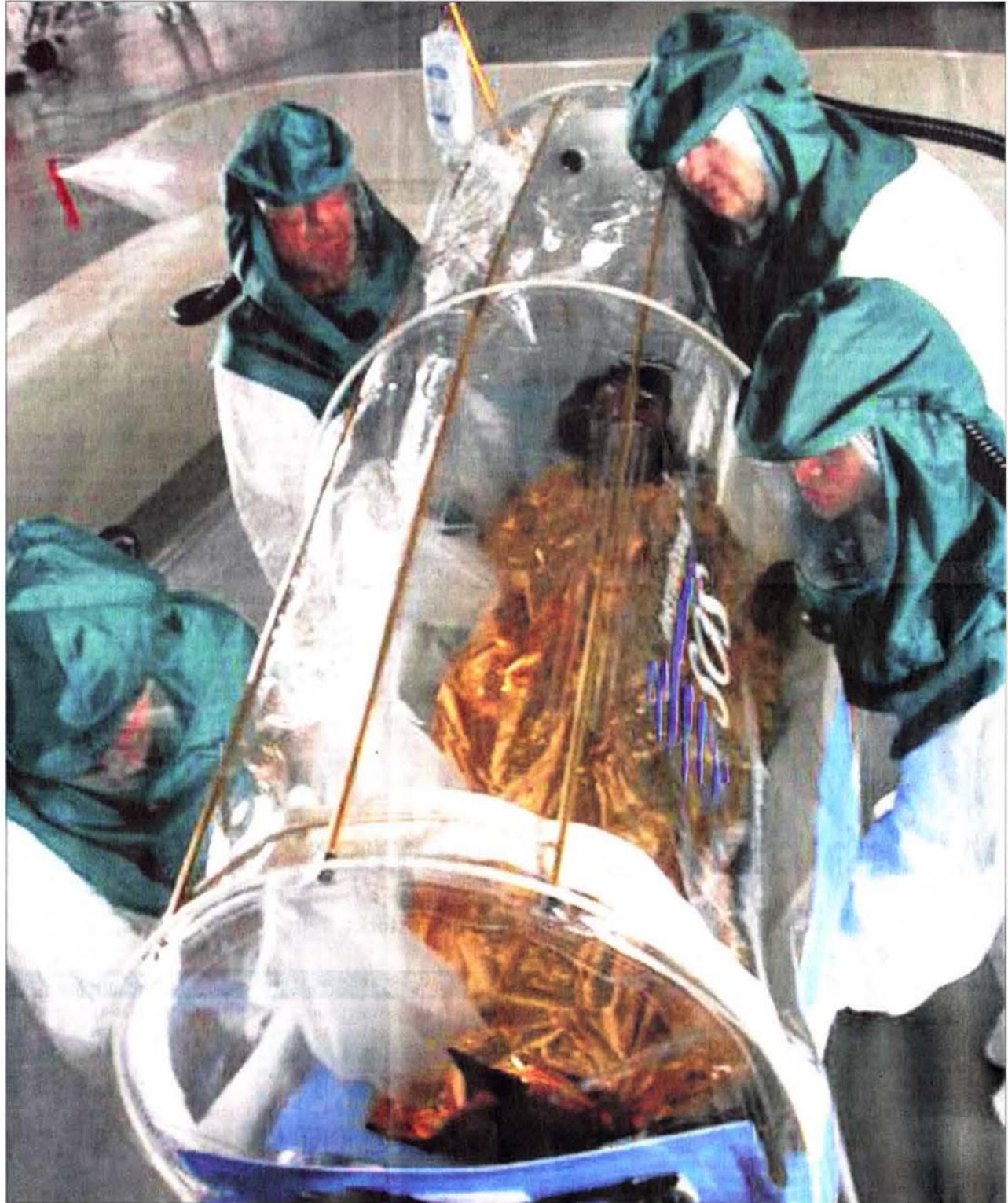
WE have learnt a good lesson from the Sars experience: businesses would now be able to react more swiftly in case of another epidemic. After all, Sars has demonstrated the costs of unpreparedness. Hence, businesses would be more inclined to devote resources to properly manage such crises. Some businesses have included such catastrophe in their crisis management procedures. Their corporate communications are expected to be able to swiftly provide relevant and timely instructions to staff so as to ensure smooth business continuity. Besides internal preparation, businesses can also be assured of guidance from government bodies, such as the Health Ministry. They are also actively monitoring and implementing precautionary measures to contain any potential outbreak. With efforts by businesses and government, Singapore is better prepared.

**David Leong**  
Managing Director  
PeopleWorldwide Consulting Pte Ltd.

THE Sars global epidemic and its impact this time will not be as catastrophic as 10 years ago. At that time, Sars was an unknown virus and there was no counter-active and contingency plans. Today, we are better prepared in terms of medical procedures and preventions.

Though the virus may have permuted to a different strain, the containment strategies are in place. The fear factor has far lessened. Though China had become the epicentre of the breakout, life goes on and there is no seeming slowdown in air travel to and from China.

In Singapore, dengue epidemic is still as fearsome as years ago and it is definitely not a new virus. Such viral threats are real but as long as there is a concerted effort to break the chain of infection and eliminate sources of infestation, whether dengue or H7N9, we are all better prepared. In Singapore, I am confident of our



medical infrastructure and capacity but individually, we must still be mindful of the hygiene factor, though the fear factor has lessened.

**Yeoh Oon Jin**  
Executive Chairman  
PwC Singapore

BUSINESSES in Singapore are generally better prepared now to deal with a Sars-like outbreak.

Prior to Sars, the Business Continuity Plans (BCP) of businesses were focused on physical disasters and IT/utility outages. Pandemic outbreaks were deemed to be less likely to occur. Furthermore, fundamental to the recovery strategy of most businesses was the assumption that staff members would be able to continue to meet face-to-face during the disaster recovery phase.

Since the 2003 Sars outbreak, businesses have realised that they need to be better prepared for the next outbreak and any other scenarios that may disrupt their operations.

Businesses which previously did not have BCPs have now developed such plans. Others have refreshed their plans to include procedures and recovery strategies to deal with pandemic outbreaks. The assumption that staff can continue to meet face-to-face, especially during a pandemic situation, is no longer valid and

businesses have identified alternative channels for command and control in the event of an outbreak.

Overall, the mindset towards business continuity readiness has changed, and among the many drivers of the change, is that being ready to deal with a disruption can potentially give them an edge over their competitors who are not as adequately prepared.

Businesses in Singapore have come to realise that being able to properly manage the aftermath of a disaster and recover their operations quickly will allow them to serve their customers sooner, and at an acceptable service level. They may even gain market share against their competitors who cannot recover quickly from the disruption. Further, many businesses now have an added expectation – for their suppliers and vendors to be business-continuity ready.

Advancements in technology have also helped businesses in Singapore to be better prepared for a pandemic outbreak. With more advanced technology, it is now possible to limit face-to-face contact in the event of a possible outbreak. More can also be done to protect our people, be it with earlier detection and screening or with the ability to work remotely.

The challenge for Singapore, as well as businesses and corporations, will lie in continuing to deliver the same quality of products and services even in the midst of crises such as health pandemics, and the key to success will be largely dependent on how agile we are –

how quickly we can respond to change and how well we communicate these changing circumstances to our people and other stakeholders.

**Zaheer K Merchant**  
Regional Director (Singapore & Europe)  
QI Group of Companies

SINGAPORE'S experiences and resource-planning since the Sars outbreak have ensured that we are better prepared to deal with any epidemic today. Information on outbreaks across the globe are shared faster and more transparently. WHO consistently tracks and notifies countries of cases/viruses. Emergency preparedness and mobilisation have increased, triaging and workflow first-line defences have been created for segregation and management, protocols emplaced for hospital visits, hospital facilities enhanced, isolation rooms and chambers including some 400 portable ones spread across various parts of Singapore exist and capacity/capability building are all factors put into place to make us well prepared. Businesses have created resource diversification and overlaps in areas of work to enable containment, but critically, to deal with employees affected at work. Insurance programmes have also been expanded. Epidemic threats remain a clear and present danger, but knowledge and early warnings play a significant role as much as our readiness to deal with them.

**Mark Micallef**

Area Vice-President, Asean  
Citrix

SINGAPORE is better prepared today for a wide-scale medical epidemic compared with 10 years ago. The reason for this increased preparedness is the adoption of progressive technology solutions that enable work-shifting; the practice of moving work to the most optimal location, time and resources. This is key in ensuring business continuity in situations where people need to work together from multiple locations on devices of their choice.

With solutions such as cloud computing, desktop virtualisation and enterprise mobility management, enterprises are able to ensure that the security of corporate data is not compromised when their employees access the corporate network beyond the constraints of the physical workplace.

**Christophe Duchatellier**

CEO  
Adecco Asia

APART from having better health and medical infrastructure such as screening facilities in place, one of the biggest takeaways from the Sars episode was business continuity. Businesses have taken steps and have invested in technology and most firms have strong business continuity planning. Hospitals are also better prepared, and have taken necessary steps to train their employees in the event of a similar emergency.

Several businesses have adopted the flexible working model where employees can work from home, thus segregating the workforce without impacting productivity. However, the biggest change is that Singapore and its people have become more aware and are more vigilant since the Sars episode, thus taking the necessary precautions to protect themselves against possible infections.

**Mike Muller**

President, Asia Pacific  
Avaya

EFFECTIVE real-time communication and collaboration are critical in times of crisis, whether in the form of another epidemic like Sars, or devastating disasters such as the 3/11 Japanese tsunami. When struck by unplanned events, fast, coordinated communication to any type of device (computer, smartphone, desk phone etc) – using a combination of visual, oral and written media can quickly bring together widely dispersed teams across organisations to work together, help others, ensure business continuity, security and public safety. Today's collaboration technology enables people to work as effectively from a remote location as from within an office. This is a significant aid to productivity in normal times, and an essential tool in ensuring operational continuity during a crisis. More and more companies in Singapore and around the region have understood the importance of planning ahead for such eventualities, and are equipping their workforce with the tools they need – to ensure they can work safely, securely and productively from their own homes whenever the need arises.

**Charlie Foo**

Vice-President for Asia Pacific  
Brocade

BUSINESSES and employees in Singapore are definitely more ready to face any possible pandemic now after having experienced the Sars outbreak a decade ago. General awareness on prevention and control measures have increased among Singaporeans. In addition to timely public communication by the relevant authority, technology has also been playing a vital role in affecting information dissemination quickly. Should an outbreak occur, technology can help mitigate risks and provide various connectivity options including telecommuting to allow employees to work from home. This helps to ensure business continuity while minimising possible disruptions and impact as a result of reduced travel and gatherings.

**Philippe H J Huinck**

Regional Managing Director,  
South and South East Asia,  
International SOS

THE lessons learnt from the 2003 Sars crisis have positively impacted both public and private approaches towards medical epidemic threats to Singapore. From a business perspective, the impact on professional continuity through unavailability or, worse still, loss of employees due to infectious disease, have given rise to a new focus on disease prevention within the workplace.

Prevention and employee health education is now an additional pillar of many companies' crisis plans. This new layer of corporate accountability is an important step towards making Singapore better prepared for any future wide-scale medical epidemic threat. The support that corporate medical initiatives provide to public health measures has already been proved during more recent epidemics, such as the 2009 flu pandemic. A wide range of programmes were implemented, from

**Victor Chia**

Chief Executive Officer  
Dairy Farm Singapore (Food)

THE outbreak of the deadly Sars disease in Singapore in 2003 was a wake-up call for all. The situation called for quick action on the part of relevant authorities and operators alike to work together to contain the problem.

It also prompted a whole new perspective in contingency planning management, one which would have remained as SOP (standard operating procedure) for most businesses till today.

The preparedness in terms of stock-piling of essential items has also been initiated and should remain a priority in FMCG operator's annual review of emergency responses. As responsible employers, increasing focus on health and safety is already standard practice, and the experience from the past event and consistent vigilance will augur well in our preparation for any pandemic.

clear staff communications and hygiene awareness advice to effective implementation of travel restrictions. Innovation is also crucial, and mobility to adapt the response to meet specific risks has become more widely recognised in the past decade. During the Sars crisis, International SOS was the first company in the world to develop a special Portable Medical Isolation Unit (photo in previous page) which allowed the safe transportation of infected patients, where doctors could simultaneously administer appropriate care.

As businesses in Singapore continue to build on past experiences and give greater gravitas to future health crisis plans, Singapore's defences against future medical threats will grow from strength to strength.

**Toby Fowlston**

Managing Director, Singapore  
Robert Walters (Singapore) Ltd

PEOPLE are the best assets to any business and to protect their welfare should be essential in management objectives. In view of possible medical epidemics, we have implemented contingency plans within our organisation to aid employees should such misfortune occur. This includes a system set in place which allows staff to work remotely from home in the event of a quarantine order. Our pantry is stocked daily with fresh fruit to boost general well-being and we have sufficient hand sanitisers around the office to ensure that we curb the spread of viruses. In addition, our carpets are professionally cleaned every six months to effectively rid the office of pests. With the advancement of our technical healthcare sector, I am confident of Singapore's capability as a regional hub for medicine research. This will allow easier access to top medical treatment and facilities.

**Stephen McNulty**

Managing Director (Asia Pacific and Japan)  
Progress Software

SINCE the outbreak of Sars in 2003, Singapore has been better able to prepare, prevent and respond to epidemics and health emergencies. Advances in technology, be it in analytics or management systems, have played a significant role in enabling healthcare institutions to monitor and react on signs of global and national epidemic outbreaks. The success of technology can be seen in how real-time surveillance system was used to control the spread of influenza A or the H1N1 in 2009. Today, we are seeing how hospitals and healthcare institutions are sharing information via ICT solutions as the practitioners continue to monitor for progress of an epidemic. We are also seeing the industry taking a more proactive approach to finding a cure for possible pandemics before it breaks out into a global crisis.

**Toby Koh**

Group Managing Director  
Ademco Security Group

BUSINESSES in Singapore have most certainly grown to appreciate the benefits of Loss Prevention and Business Continuity Planning since the 9/11 and Sars incidents.

We see that CEOs and business owners have increased investment in risk management, which includes security, safety and disaster recovery. There is heightening awareness of concrete steps to mitigate risk for employees, shareholders as well as for their customers. Clients are now, more than ever, asking their vendors, suppliers and business partners on their



loss prevention and business continuity strategy as a vital aspect of evaluation. The high adoption rate of technology such as cloud computing has enabled businesses to carry on ticking in the event of a wide-scale medical epidemic.

In Ademco, we adopted cloud computing using salesforce.com several years ago, not just in Singapore but across our entire group in the Apac region. One important consideration when investing in this cloud implementation was from the lessons of the last Sars outbreak. We needed to deploy technology to enable our team to function from anywhere as long as Internet access is available. This would ensure business continues to run even through an epidemic. The push by the Singapore government to improve our telecommunication infrastructure is an essential part of this success too. In recent years, clients have also requested us to use the integrated security platform to immediately segregate access for staff and visitors into pre-planned areas and routes in compliance with medical epidemic best practice at a click of a mouse. Leveraging on technology as a strategy is more important than ever to protect lives and assets.

**Ronald Lee**

Managing Director  
PrimeStaff Management Services Pte Ltd

We are a progressive country and I believe Singapore's healthcare system has taken the lessons from the Sars outbreak and there are now certain protocols to help contain such an epidemic in the future. History has also taught us how critical it is for a rapid response in order to contain the situation. Additionally, medical technology has come a long way in the past 10 years since Sars. In fact, there was a recent report that Singapore scientists have already found a way to generate antibodies that can neutralise and deactivate the H7 strain of bird flu viruses, inching closer to a possible vaccine. With regard to the business environment, I suspect that most companies may not have been actively working on implementing a standard protocol to handle another Sars-like outbreak on-site, unless they are B2C businesses such as retail or food & beverage, perhaps. However, I believe the business community would have probably learnt from the past in the sense that they may be better able to identify such epidemic risks more quickly and perhaps take necessary precautions such as the decision to shut down operations if it comes to that.

**Lim Soon Hock**

Managing Director  
PLAN-B ICAG Pte Ltd

BUSINESSES in Singapore take the cue from the government in terms of preparedness. Should the government assess the situation and find the need for a higher level of preparedness, compared with what is normal, commensurate with a Sars threat, we can expect businesses to respond swiftly and be compliant. It was the case in the last outbreak. With that experience, we can expect businesses to be better prepared now, in the event of another Sars-like outbreak. Singapore responded very well the last time.

I remember Singapore introducing a temperature-sensing equipment at our airports and other immigration checkpoints. It was locally designed within weeks of the outbreak, and became much sought after by countries in the region. Although it was the first time our healthcare system was tested for an epidemic, it was swiftly implemented from contact tracing, to isolation, treatment and care. Singapore was suddenly

confronted with a logistics problem of supply for face masks and clinical thermometers, but quickly had it under control. Such was the level of Singapore's responsiveness and preparedness.

Today, the standard operating procedures are in place to respond to another Sars-like epidemic. On top of this, we have now taken it to a higher level with on-going research in antibodies to fight the bird flu. The recent breakthrough by our scientists to find antibodies that can fight the H7 strain of bird flu viruses, brings Singapore closer to fighting H7N9, the latest strain of bird flu that has affected several countries in the region. The bird flu virus knows no boundaries. Government and businesses must, therefore, continue to work together closely to combat this potential threat and eliminate it swiftly, as soon as it hits our shores.

**David Dzienciel**

Regional Vice-President and  
General Manager, Asia Pacific  
Parallels Software Pte Ltd

TODAY, Singapore is better prepared and less likely to be caught off-guard should we have another Sars-like outbreak. Businesses are able to cope with productivity issues as the typical office worker today is a mobile one, compared with 10 years ago. Singapore has one of the highest numbers of users of mobile devices in Asia, and as the Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) trend becomes a mainstream reality in the workplace, employees are free to use their device of choice both at work and in their personal lives. This means workers today are better connected, and can seamlessly work from just about anywhere at any time, accessing the right applications to support them. This BYOD trend can also help businesses to continue to operate seamlessly to increase efficiency and productivity, in the event of another Sars-like outbreak.

**Joshua Yim**

CEO  
Achieve Group

THE current bird flu outbreak doesn't seem to be as serious and appears to be much better contained, compared with Sars. Thus I believe that this epidemic should not turn out as bad as Sars. However, this is something that is difficult to predict because of the very nature of such viruses.

Singapore is generally much better prepared to face any epidemic than previously, due to the experience we gained from the Sars incident 10 years ago. As a country, we are better equipped and better conditioned to face such a possible health threat. On the business front, many companies are also much more prepared because of the lessons learnt. Many companies, including ours, have implemented business continuity initiatives that outline protocols for how disasters and other crises like an outbreak should be handled.

Businesses need to have such contingency plans and preventive measures in place. Every company should embrace this. I also believe that the government should do its part to raise awareness through its various agencies and quasi-government bodies, and encourage businesses to adopt a business continuity mindset so that any future catastrophes could be well contained.

For the complete list of views from CEOs,  
go to <http://businessimes.com.sg>