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Emerging stronger from the China crisis

Since the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) was first reported last month, public-health authorities worldwide have been concerned that data from China, where the disease apparently originated last November, are slow to emerge and may well be inaccurate. An April 9 report confirmed that WHO finally had extensive data from Guangdong Province. But only as of April 12 were WHO officials able to investigate the situation in Beijing, where serious problems in reporting and systematic tracing of contacts have existed. Further, a retired physician, Jiang Yangyong, has accused China's Ministry of Health of lying about the extent of the epidemic in Beijing; he claims the numbers of cases and deaths are much higher than official reports.

The epidemic is taking a serious toll on travel, tourism, and finance in east Asia, with Hong Kong, where schools have been closed since last month, particularly hard hit. As a result of the ease and ubiquity of travel, the disease has spread swiftly around the world. Thus the difficulties inherent in characterising and responding to a newly emerging disease (see *Lancet* 2003; **361**: 1319–25) have been made even more complex by a host of global social and economic factors. As of April 15, a cumulative total of 3169 cases of SARS, with 144 deaths, had been reported to WHO from 21 countries. Clearly, global co-operation is urgently needed, without regard for political disputes (see p 1386–87).

China's lack of openness about SARS is unfortunately reminiscent of its historic response to other health challenges the country faces, including a high suicide rate, especially among women, problems with the safety of its blood supply, and a rapid spread of HIV/AIDS (see *Lancet* 2002; **359**: 835–40 and 2002; **360**: 1770–75). The Government's initial reluctance to acknowledge the extent of its SARS problem is consistent with longstanding difficulties in getting information from the provinces to central authorities, and with a policy of regarding national statistics as state secrets. Such secrecy poses a critical early challenge to the country's new leadership, particularly President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, who have pledged to loosen restrictions on the dissemination of information.

A change in leadership is only the latest in a series of

events pushing China into the global spotlight. As the venue for the 2008 Olympics and a new member of the World Trade Organisation, China is poised for positive change on many fronts—political, cultural, economic, and social. Now the SARS outbreak provides another opportunity, albeit unsought, for China to demonstrate its willingness to be a team player in the international public-health arena.

Certainly the initial response to the outbreak raises serious questions about China's ability to handle a crisis. What is the implication of the country's clear failure to engage with the international public-health community in a timely fashion? The time that has been lost in reporting the disease may have impeded scientific progress and cost lives. But perhaps more importantly now, what is the implication of this experience for how the Chinese will handle health data in the future? The Chinese Government should seize the moment to learn from its awkward handling of SARS, a disease that obviously does not respect national borders. In an ever-shrinking world, technical information can and must be successfully divorced from political concerns, and data important for public health must be made freely available to the scientific and professional communities.

And there is some evidence for optimism that the country will rise to the challenge. One barometer of change is more accurate reporting of suicide data, which has taken place in the past couple of years. Although data on infectious diseases, especially HIV/AIDS, are still inadequate, owing in part to a paucity of testing facilities, this is a correctable problem. Official Chinese statistics estimate 850 000 people infected with HIV, but the true number may be closer to 1·5 million, and could rise to 10 million by 2010. Once it has provided full and accurate information that will enable SARS to be brought under control, China might well turn its attention to another infectious disease crisis. A concerted effort to compile accurate statistics on the prevalence of HIV/AIDS would demonstrate that China is able to learn from its mistakes, and agile and wise enough to acknowledge its responsibilities not only to its own citizens but also to the rest of the world.

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