

22 April 2003

Dear Fellow Singaporeans and Residents,

Fighting SARS Together

On Saturday, I appealed to Singaporeans to exercise personal responsibility in our fight against SARS. Only when you follow faithfully all the rules, procedures and recommendations we have put in place to contain the outbreak, will we win the fight. You must all play your part to ensure that there are no holes in our ring-fence against SARS.

Unfortunately, there are still some Singaporeans who do not follow the advice given by our health officials. Some are irresponsible. Others are irrational because of their fear of SARS. Whatever the reasons, they pose a danger to themselves and to the wider community.

The cases of infection at the Pasir Panjang Wholesale Centre show the danger of such behaviour. The family of eight related to the 72-year old man who works at the centre went to see a general practitioner (GP) when they came down with fever. The GP rightly suspected that they could be SARS cases. He called for the special ambulance service. While waiting for the ambulance, he provided the family with masks, and instructed them to wear the masks. He placed chairs in a designated area outside his clinic and instructed them to remain there till the ambulance arrived. However, when the doctor came out later to check on the family, to his horror, they had removed their masks and had wandered off to a nearby food centre and a Chinese medical hall. By not obeying the GP's instructions, the family had put the people around them at risk.

The other case of infection at the Pasir Panjang Wholesale Centre is another example of irresponsible behaviour. The man who worked at the centre had had a fever for a few days. He visited a GP, a polyclinic and two *sinsehs* before going to Changi General Hospital, where he was transferred to Tan Tock Seng Hospital. His actions have created a big pool of people who could potentially have been infected by him.

My advice is, if you are unwell, see a doctor immediately. If you continue to be unwell, go back to the same doctor. The doctor would know that your condition has worsened and would act accordingly. On the other hand, if you doctor-hop or hospital-hop, the new doctor would not know about the progression of your illness and you would not get the best treatment. Along the way, you may infect many other people, including your family and friends.

And be truthful with your doctor. Do not hide your symptoms and history of contacts. He is there to help you.

In fact, if you have SARS symptoms such as fever, cough, breathing difficulties and muscle aches and you suspect that you may have come into contact with a SARS patient, you should request for a special ambulance to send you to Tan Tock Seng Hospital for a check-up. Early detection and treatment will help you to recover. As of today, some 110 SARS patients have recovered and have been discharged.

There is no reason to be fearful about going to Tan Tock Seng Hospital. On the contrary, you may be making a fatal mistake by not going there when you suspect you have SARS. You will not catch SARS by going to Tan Tock Seng Hospital for SARS screening or for follow-up. The hospital is safe because stringent infection controls have been introduced. Indeed, as a result of these stringent measures, since 31 March, no patient of Tan Tock Seng Hospital has fallen ill from SARS as a result of being infected in the hospital.

I am also deeply concerned about the behaviour of some persons served with Home Quarantine Orders. They refused to cooperate. They did not answer telephone calls by our officials, or told our officials not to bother them. Also, 14 persons are known to have broken their Orders.

Apart from protecting the public, Home Quarantine Orders are also to protect those served such Orders, as well as their family. The telephone calls by our officials are to detect any signs of the disease, and to commence early treatment.

For the wider good, we now have to take a tougher approach in enforcing Home Quarantine Orders. We simply cannot afford to have those on home quarantine breach it, and run the risk of going undetected for SARS, or worse, infecting others. For once SARS spreads through the community, we risk losing control of it, and will not be able to isolate

and contain it. Therefore, from now on, when a person on home quarantine does not answer the telephone calls from our officials, CISCO officers will immediately proceed to electronically-tag them, whether or not they have broken the quarantine.

In addition, at the next Parliamentary sitting on 24 April, we will be putting through amendments to the Infectious Diseases Act. The amendments are to provide for composition fines, so that those who breach Home Quarantine Orders can be fined without having to be charged in court. The amendments will also provide for jail terms for those who repeatedly breach the Orders. Given the critical SARS situation, we will be putting through the amendments on a Certificate of Urgency, which will allow all three readings of the Amendment Bill to be effected at the 24 April Parliament sitting.

These measures may be harsh, but they are necessary. Taking a lenient attitude will not help us break the cycle of infection. Instead, it may undermine the stringent infection controls we have painstakingly put in place to protect Singaporeans from SARS.

To succeed in containing SARS in Singapore, everyone must cooperate and play his part. We can overcome this latest crisis if we work together, as we have done in previous crises.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Goh Chok Tong', enclosed within a simple rectangular frame.

GOH CHOK TONG