

Stop, Drop, and Cover!

By Ruben Mesa, MD

The fires in California, Hurricane Katrina, 9/11... We all live in a world with tremendous uncertainty and potential for disaster. Emergencies can arise from terrorism, weather, or an infectious pandemic. As hematologists, we might be called on at any time to give emergency aid — to a stranger on the street, in an airplane, or even in the middle of a marathon! And with our unique set of skills, we might be called upon to aid in the discovery or management of a natural or manmade disaster.

This year's annual EHA/ASH Policy Forum, scheduled to take place today from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. in Hall A1, will focus on Emergency Preparedness. The session will be co-chaired by ASH President Dr. Andrew Schafer and EHA (European Hematology Association) President Dr. Willem Fibbe. Although emergencies may take many forms, the focus of today's session will be on how to respond to an outbreak of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) virus.

Dr. Don Low was on site and played an important role in Toronto, Canada, during the SARS outbreak, and he will present a discussion titled "SARS Outbreak in Toronto: Lessons Learned." Dr. Low, an internationally recognized authority in the epidemiology and mechanisms of antimicrobial resistance, was acting at the time as the Microbiologist-in-Chief at the Toronto Medical Laboratory and Mount Sinai Hospital. His diagnostic laboratory serves as reference laboratory for 100 hospitals in the greater Toronto area and was at the eye of the SARS storm. He will offer his unique "front line" perspective about the challenges faced during the 2003 global SARS epidemic.

Dr. Albert Osterhaus of Erasmus Medical Center in Rotterdam, Netherlands, is widely regarded as "The Virus Hunter" for his unique and insightful methods of studying infectious disease. Dr. Osterhaus played an important role in characterizing the SARS virus. His laboratory was the first to demonstrate that SARS was a coronavirus, a member of a family which usually resides in carnivorous animals such as civet cats. He will be sharing his perspective on investigating and identifying the SARS virus and the challenges of emerging viral pathogens. Dr. Osterhaus states that when it comes to emerging infections, we all need to "expect the unexpected."

"When we look at the last decade and the challenges of influenza, HIV, Avian Flu H5N1, SARS, and West Nile virus in the United States, we see that we can expect additional viral mutations that will become a threat to man," conveys Dr. Osterhaus. He adds that we can expect that an influenza pandemic is coming, and we must be prepared for that eventuality. Dr. Osterhaus also plans to discuss the predisposing societal factors which are potentially aiding viral diseases, including globalization, international travel, environmental pressures leading to changes in humanity's contact with animals, and increased urbanization.

"Emergencies have always been necessary for progress. It was darkness which produced the lamp. It was fog that produced the compass. It was hunger that drove us to exploration," –Victor Hugo 1802-1885. Although never desirable, emergencies have the potential to bring out the best in ourselves, our society, and perhaps also our field. Come share in this unique and insightful policy session.