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Chinese University Survey Shows Students and Professionals Pessimistic and Worried about SARS

A recently completed survey of university students and professionals by The Chinese University of Hong Kong has revealed that an overwhelming majority regard SARS as Hong Kong's leading threat in the coming year. They are considerably more pessimistic about the chance of personal infection and fatality than are supported by actual statistics or estimates given by the WHO.

However, most respondents believe that Hong Kong has the capability of dealing with this epidemic, and approve of the mandatory measures implemented by government.

The survey, led by Professor Jia Jian Min of the Department of Marketing of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, was conducted at the end of April, and mid-May, 2003 and covered 155 university students and 55 professionals in various industry sectors.

The key findings are:

- a) 93 per cent of the respondents name SARS as the Number 1 threat to Hong Kong citizens in the coming year, ahead of the bird flu, lung cancer, pneumonia, AIDS and nuclear radiation.
- b) Their estimated probability of infection by the general population is 11 per cent, personal infection eight per cent, and survival rate only 80 per cent. Their perceived survival rate is significantly lower than the publicized WHO estimates of 85—86 percent, and 99 per cent for those under age 24. 40 per cent of the respondents have, at some point, imagined that they have contracted SARS.
- c) This over-pessimistic attitude is due to inadequate understanding of the cause of SARS, uncertainty about the consequence of infection, the fact that no effective cure has been found, the highly infectious nature of the virus and wide media coverage.
- d) Of the twenty factors which affect respondents' assessment of the risk arising from SARS, the top factors are infections by family, friends and work associates, new cases of infection announced by government and increase in fatality cases.
- e) Respondents have confirmed that the SARS epidemic has had a significant impact on their work and study, and to a large extent undermined their confidence in their future lives and careers.

- f) Respondents have, in the past few weeks, taken preventive measures such as wearing face masks, improving personal hygiene (e.g. frequently washing their hands), reducing shopping and eating out. However, they have not deliberately cut down on class attendance and riding public transportation. One-third of them did resort to medication, including Chinese herbal medicine.
- g) While respondents admit that they do not have a good understanding of the SARS situation in Mainland China and Beijing, 91.6 per cent think the epidemic situation in Beijing is far worse than in Hong Kong. This may be due to the fact that the epidemic is still raging in China, while it has probably peaked in Hong Kong.

“The survey has uncovered a number of interesting findings,” said Professor Jia. “One of these is the attention they pay to new cases of infection rather than suspected cases.”

“I hope our findings will help improve understanding by government and related organizations of Hong Kong citizens’ psychological state and behavioural response, thus facilitating their policy deliberations,” he added. “Government could consider actively helping to alleviate the various feelings of uncertainty in people’s minds. They can, perhaps, publicize the longer-term health implications of SARS sufferers, the progress of various research in the prevention and treatment of SARS. All these can eliminate feelings of uncertainty about the epidemic and help build a more rational assessment of the SARS risk.”

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