

CONFIDENTIAL

Your ref.: CB2/SC2

19 April 2004

Miss Flora Tai
Clerk to Select Committee
(By Fax: 2248 2011 – 8 pages)

Dear Miss Tai,

**Select Committee to inquire into the handling of
the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome outbreak by
the Government and the Hospital Authority**

As requested, I forward the following two documents -

- my professional qualifications and experience;
and
- my written statement.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Paul Saw

Written Statement of Dr. Paul Saw

I provide below my written statement to the Select Committee. Being a retired Deputy Director of Health who had been drafted in to help in the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic as a temporary volunteer advisor, I have consulted my former colleagues in the Department of Health (DH) to assist me in recollecting events and presenting information to the Select Committee. However, I remain responsible for the accuracy of this written statement which has been prepared to the best of my knowledge and recollection.

Background

2. On the morning of 29 March 2003, Dr. E K Yeoh, the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (SHWF) phoned me at home and asked me to help in the investigation and control of the SARS outbreak. I agreed to contribute my effort as far as I could but as my health condition at that time was very unstable, we had an understanding that I would help out for as long as my health could hold out.

3. Subsequently, I joined DH as a volunteer that morning (29 March 2003). Having regard to my special circumstances, Dr. Margaret Chan, the ex-Director of Health, assigned me to the following tasks:

- (i) to assist in the co-ordination of the investigation of SARS cases, including the tracing and surveillance of contacts;
- (ii) to advise on the field investigations of the outbreaks; and,
- (iii) to oversee the joint study with the University of Hong Kong and the Imperial College (United Kingdom) on SARS, titled "Transmission Dynamics of the Etiological Agent of SARS in Hong Kong – Impact on Public Health Interventions".

I continued to work in DH until 15 April 2003 when my health failed again.

The Meeting held on 5 April 2003

4. I did not know nor have heard of Dr. Stephen Ng before 4 April 2003. On the morning of 4 April, Dr. Yeoh told me that a Dr. Stephen Ng was introduced to the Government as someone experienced in epidemiology who wished to assist in the investigation of the Amoy Gardens outbreak. I telephoned Dr Stephen Ng afterwards to offer to share with him the results of the epidemiological investigation of the SARS outbreak at the Amoy Gardens. In the same evening, we met, for the first time, at a meeting held in the Environment, Transport and Works Bureau.

5. The meeting with SHWF on 5 April 2003 morning was one of the many informal meetings which were held to keep ourselves abreast of the developments in the investigations of the Amoy Gardens outbreak, exchange views and consider further actions as and when necessary. Attendees of the meeting on 5 April included Dr. Yeoh and Dr. S V Lo from the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB), Dr. Thomas Tsang and myself from DH; Dr. Trevor Ellis from the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD); Mr. M C Yuen from the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and Dr. Stephen Ng. After the meeting on 5 April, Dr. Ng called me twice to ask about the progress in the investigation. I cannot recall the exact dates of his calls but remember that I did tell him about the number of rats trapped in the few days after the meeting on 5 April 2003.

6. Owing to the lapse of time, I cannot recall all the minute or exact details of the meeting held on 5 April 2003. Nevertheless, I shall try to provide in the ensuing my responses to the specific issues raised in Appendix IV of the Select Committee's letter dated 8 April 2004 as far as practicable -

Issue 1 When were the attendees told of the test results of the rat droppings and throat swab and what was their reaction?

A.1 - I learned from DH's Pathology Service on 5 April 2003 morning that initial test results on rat droppings and throat swabs collected by FEHD had shown positive Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) results for coronavirus in some of the samples. I understood that the results were available late at

night on 4 April and the Pathology Service had immediately informed the Director who then notified Dr. Yeoh at night.

- I reported this initial finding during the meeting on 5 April where Dr. Stephen Ng was also present. Naturally, the participants were concerned about this new piece of information particularly since its significance was unknown at that stage.
- I must emphasize that, contrary to the statements given by Dr. Stephen Ng, I was not in an "agitated state" when I talked about the results of tests done on the rats. Moreover, it would be presumptuous to say that I was convinced at that stage of the investigation that the rats were responsible for the outbreak at Amoy Gardens merely on the basis of such preliminary results. What I was convinced at the time was that further studies would have to be made to determine the significance of these results, including whether the rats were merely passive carriers of the virus or had been infected and, if so, the implications of such infection in terms of the subsequent pathogenicity of the virus i.e., the ability to cause infection in human beings.
- I did not call in Dr. Ellis of the AFCD or Mr. Yuen of the FEHD to the meeting. In view of my advisory capacity in the DH, I did not call in officers of other departments directly to meetings or to undertake investigations during my short tenure in the investigation of the SARS outbreak.

Issue 2 Who sent Dr. Trevor Ellis to perform the autopsies on the rats trapped the night before?

- A.2 - Dr. Yeoh sent Dr. Ellis to perform the autopsies on the rats.

Issue 3 When did Dr. Yeoh join the meeting?

- A.3 - While I cannot recollect the exact time when Dr. Yeoh joined the meeting, Dr. Ellis was at the meeting when Dr. Yeoh arrived.

Issue 4 When did Mr. Yuen arrive at the meeting? Was he summoned to the meeting by Dr. Yeoh? If yes, why was he summoned to the meeting?

Issue 6 Was there any discussion on the killing of rats?

A.4 & 6 - Though I cannot recall the exact hour, I remember that Mr. Yuen joined the meeting definitely after the arrival of Dr. Yeoh. Mr. Yuen was summoned by Dr. Yeoh to brief us about the situation of rat infestation in Amoy Gardens. Mr. Yuen explained to the meeting the current situation of rat infestation in Amoy Gardens and what he proposed to do with the rats. The meeting deferred to his advice on the best ways to deal with the rat infestation.

Issue 5 Was there any discussion on the ramifications of the spread of SARS by rats?

A.5 - I cannot recall that the meeting had any specific discussions in this regard. Nevertheless, I did have some vague memory that Dr. Ng might have muttered something about the impact on Hong Kong if rats had a role in spreading the disease.

- I cannot recall having heard Dr. Yeoh expressing the fear that there might be riots in Hong Kong.

Issue 7 Did Dr. Ng suggest that the rats which were virus positive should be kept alive to observe how long the virus stayed active in them?

A.7 - Yes, Dr. Ng did make such a suggestion. However, the overriding priority at the time was to confirm whether or not the rats had been infected and for this, autopsy of the rats was the best and fastest method to find out any signs of virus replication in these animals. With some samples tested coronavirus PCR-positive, the public health importance and urgency of infection investigation of the rats through autopsies overrode those of the suggested study on the active duration of

the virus in the rats alive.

- As a matter of fact, the results of the various tests subsequently performed on the autopsied rat specimens confirmed that the rats themselves were not infected, an indication that the rats were passive carriers of the virus.

Issue 8 Was there any discussion on what to say to the public about the investigations on the rats? Did Dr. Yeoh give instruction to stop the investigation on rats?

Issue 9 Did Dr. Yeoh request everyone at the meeting to keep the rat findings confidential? Did Dr. Yeoh send someone to call Dr. Ellis to stop performing the autopsies on rats?

A.8-9 - I cannot recall any discussions at the meeting on what to say to the public. Dr. Yeoh did not give instruction to stop the investigation on rats.

- The principles of transparency and prompt dissemination of accurate information had been guiding our operations all along. As bits and pieces of results released in isolation could be misinterpreted, I suggested that Dr. Ellis who was on his way to perform the autopsy be reminded to take steps to safeguard his findings against premature leakage. Dr. Yeoh did not stop Dr. Ellis performing the autopsies.

Issue 10 Was there any discussion on the evacuation of all the residents of Amoy Gardens? Did Dr. Yeoh make any statement to the effect that the residents of Amoy Gardens would have to be sacrificed?

A.10 - My recollection is that there was no discussion on the evacuation of Amoy Gardens at the meeting and Dr Yeoh did not make any statement to the effect that the residents of Amoy Gardens would have to be sacrificed.

Issue 11 Did Dr. Ng suggest warning people to keep their premises rat-safe by closing windows and covering their food? Was Dr. Ng involved in the investigation into the outbreak at Amoy Gardens? Did Dr. Ng stay until the end of the meeting on 5 April 2003?

- A.11 - Yes and Dr. Yeoh agreed to consider Dr. Ng's suggestion.
- Dr. Ng did not participate in the investigation of the outbreak at Amoy Gardens.
 - Dr. Ng left when the meeting ended.

Issue 12 What was the purpose of Dr. Lo's call to Dr Ng on 8 April 2003?

- A.12 - I had not been informed and had no idea about Dr. Ng's letter of 7 April 2003 to Dr. Yeoh or Dr. Lo's phone call to Dr. Ng on 8 April 2003.

Dr. Paul Saw
19 April 2004