

BOUNCING BACK

When Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) struck in March 2003, Hong Kong's spirit of resolve and solidarity proved to be a powerful medicine in the fight against the disease.

By Mark Caldwell



THE SARS VIRUS HIT THE TERRITORY LIKE A TYPHOON, FELLING MEMBERS OF THE public and wreaking havoc on businesses. But Hong Kong demonstrated its famous resilience by staging an immediate and effective fight-back. The combined efforts of the government, corporate sector and private citizens drew into sharp focus the city's formidable "can do" attitude, winning acclaim from the World Health Organization and the international community at large.

As one of the most prominent and successful companies in the region, Hutchison Whampoa immediately took up the challenge to help beat SARS, focusing the full force of its considerable human and managerial resources on providing relief for victims, assistance to healthcare workers and support for the general population. The Li Ka-shing Group raised and contributed HK\$6,549,474 (approximately US\$840,000).

Life has returned to normal in this bustling metropolis. Residents have adopted a much more hygienic and caring approach to everyday living, and the community is lobbying hard for tourists to return. Hong Kong is a little sadder in the wake of the tragedy, but it is also much stronger.

Like many healthcare colleagues battling in the frontline to stem the SARS outbreak, Caroline Fu*, a nurse at Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH) fell victim to the virus in early April and was hospitalised.

Her husband Peter, who is on the pharmacy staff at PMH, was left to take care of their 6-year-old daughter.

To prevent the virus from spreading, patients were put in quarantine with no visitors allowed.

"For the first two weeks, I felt powerless to help Caroline because, although we could speak to each other by mobile phone, it was so hard to provide emotional support without being able to see or touch," Peter recalls. "We felt very isolated from each other."

Then, halfway through Caroline's illness, the Fu family's prayers were answered.

Understanding the needs of patients to

be able to see their loved ones, Hutchison Global Communications (HGC) responded swiftly.

As owner of Hong Kong's largest fibre-optic network, HGC deployed its extensive technical know-how to provide free "Video Visit Services" at Princess Margaret and Wong Tai Sin Hospitals.

To keep families and friends abreast of patients' condition and rate of recovery, HGC set up computers equipped with video telephony services in the isolation wards which in turn were connected to Video Service Centres in the hospital lobbies. The process involved laying broadband cables linking to the HGC fibre-optic network, testing the computer equipment and providing logistics services to set up a booking system.

Once the Video Visit Service was in operation, Peter and Caroline were among the first to experience this novel service.

"Knowing that I could finally talk to

my wife 'face-to-face,' I naturally also brought our daughter who wanted very much to see her mother," Peter recalls. "The service ran extremely smoothly. There was no delay, the transmission was flawless and the resolution was perfect. Amidst all the worry, it was a very special moment for us. As a family, we were extremely grateful for the service."

Dr Ko Wing-man, Director (Professional Services & Public Affairs) of the Hong Kong Hospital Authority (HKHA) said the Video Visit Service provided more than just a safe and convenient visiting option. "I believe [it] was a strong factor in their recovery," he said.

The initiative was in fact a joint effort between several members of the Li Ka-shing group of companies. While HGC provided full back-up and support, the Li Ka Shing Foundation donated 50 computers and Cheung

*Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals.

Kong (Holdings) contributed the Innomedia videophones

UNITED FRONT

The Video Visit Service was by no means the only gesture on the part of HWL companies. The SARS crisis brought out the best in all the businesses and employees alike. They demonstrated uncommon unity and generosity, reflecting the fighting spirit of the Hong Kong public at large.

The World Health Organization (WHO) first reported the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong on March 12 and the fight-back began immediately, with hospitals and medical staff in the frontline. As the virus spread, the public became reluctant to visit hospitals and clinics. Some hospitals reported that as many as 20% of Hong Kong's estimated one million chronic illness patients skipped their scheduled appointments, preferring to get their health information elsewhere. In some cases, they even failed to pick up their medication. As a consequence, the demand for health-related information soared.

To meet this demand, Watsons Your Personal Store started publishing leaflets and extended operating hours of its pharmaceutical services. With 139 stores in the territory, Hong Kong's favourite high street health & beauty chain already had the experience and infrastructure to make a significant impact. A year earlier the chain had established the "Pharmacy Self Care Programme" to provide health-care advice to customers.

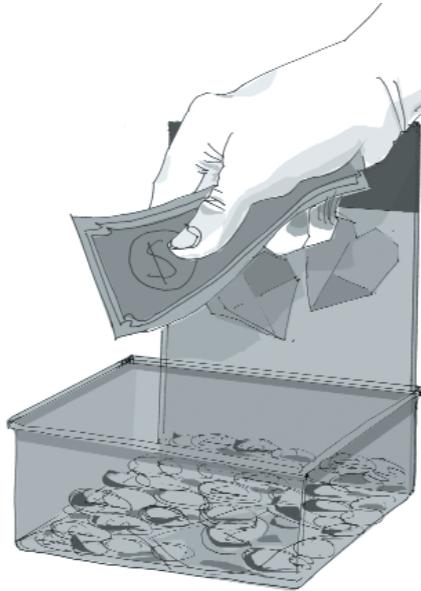
Watsons estimated that in April alone more than 100,000 people sought advice from pharmaceutical service providers or collected leaflets on SARS prevention tips.

Watsons also teamed up with the Drug Education Resources Centre (DERC) to launch the "General Drugs & SARS Hotline," the first professional counselling service of its kind in Hong Kong.

The Hotline had widespread volunteer support from institutions, community clinics and other public health organisation pharmacists. With a huge surge in demand for professional advice and information, pharmacy graduates from the Chinese University of Hong Kong donated their time to answer general calls and offer professional drug and healthcare counselling.

Hutchison Whampoa Properties (HWP) meanwhile was among the first companies in Hong Kong to implement

the most stringent cleaning procedures at all the properties under its management to protect and reassure tenants and visitors.



The Li Ka-shing Group raised and contributed a total of HK\$6,549,474 towards the fight against SARS

RACING TO THE RESCUE

The PARKnSHOP (PNS) supermarket chain initiated a two-week fundraising campaign – in conjunction with affiliated retailers Great, Watsons Wine Cellar and Fortress – to raise money for the "We Care Education Fund" to help children who have lost one or both parents to SARS.

"The outbreak brought immeasurable tragedy to many families, and at least 30 children have been orphaned by the disease," said Iwan Evans, CEO of the A.S. Watson Group's Food, Electronics & General Merchandise division. "PARKnSHOP wants to do something practical and demonstrate our sympathy with these families, and the deep sense of loss we share with the entire community."

The initiative worked in three ways: Firstly, PNS donated 1% of all its Hong Kong sales on two shopping days; secondly, customers contributed their loose change at collection boxes located at checkout counters, and; thirdly, staff were encouraged to make donations.

PNS and partners had hoped to raise HK\$1 million, but the effort was such a resounding success that the final figure

was more than double at HK\$2,108,288 (approximately US\$270,000).

After the fund-raising period, PNS collected a further HK\$242,541 for "Project Blossom," an initiative by the Hong Kong Performing Artistes Guild and co-organised by local daily *Ming Pao*, to help SARS-affected families.

Throughout the fight-back, PNS was also active in various other initiatives, providing foodstuffs for medical personnel; donating gift bags to cheer up Amoy Gardens residents (the worst-hit community) who had been placed in isolation camps; and contributing prizes for a TV charity show held in benefit of Amoy Gardens residents. Watsons Water also offered support to the Amoy Gardens community, sponsoring distilled water.

Meanwhile, doing what it does best, PNS ensured that Hong Kong residents did not run short of cleaning supplies to combat the SARS virus. PNS airfreighted in supplies such as bleach, liquid soap and protective gloves at no extra expense to customers. PNS also sourced a million oranges for health-care workers on behalf of the Li Ka Shing Foundation (see sidebar).

In other initiatives taken by HWL's associated companies, Hongkong Electric (HKE) offered loan-guarantee measures to help retail, restaurant, tourism and entertainment businesses, which were the worst hit. In addition, HKE donated HK\$125,000 in support of the "Operation UNITE" campaign.

To express their respect for frontline medical staff, Hutchison Harbour Ring, HWL's manufacturing arm, donated HK\$20,000 to the "One Heart One Mind Anti-SARS" campaign.

Fortress, the electrical appliance retail chain, also pitched in to help distribute the Red Cross "Heart-to-Heart Cards" through its outlets. The cards gave SARS prevention tips and urged the public to show appreciation for medical personnel and encouragement to patients.

Once the virus had been contained, HWL again gave generously, this time HK\$100,000 in support of the establishment of the Sports Medicine Foundation for SARS Rehabilitation. The initiative will help patients to overcome the effects of prolonged immobilisation and to regain an active and productive quality of life.

CARING COMMUNITY

As a major player in Hong Kong, the HWL Group employs almost 30,000

people, representing the community at large. They gave generously, collectively donating (through their employers) a considerable sum in the fight against SARS.

Apart from the HK\$177,000 contributed by PNS's staff, HKE's employees donated more than \$132,000 to the HKHA Charitable Foundation. The staff at Hongkong International Terminals (HIT) meanwhile showed their support for neighbouring Princess Margaret Hospital, collecting HK\$102,500 to help purchase protective suits for the health workers. HIT matched the amount donated by its staff, bringing the total to HK\$205,000.

Additionally, the Community Caring Group (CCG) – a staff volunteer group of HIT – launched a “Courtesy Telephone Calls” project to advise and remind the elderly on SARS-preventative measures. The CCG also made a separate donation to buy surgical facemasks for the elderly.

SILVER LINING

A collective sigh of relief greeted the announcement by the WHO on June 23 that Hong Kong was at last free of SARS. In the short term, SARS has taken a heavy toll, not only in terms of the tragic loss of human life, but also on the economic well-being of the city. Yet the community has again shown its resilience in the face of adversity. The crisis has focused attention on the already world-class health system in ways that will pave the way to permanent improvements for the management of all diseases.

For the first time in history, the full might of the world's scientific community worked together to identify, isolate and eradicate the SARS virus, and Hong Kong scientists played a significant role, being the first to identify SARS as a strain of the corona virus.

“While we count the human and economic cost of the SARS outbreak we should also acknowledge the good things that have come out of it,” said Director of Health Dr Margaret Chan, citing “the individual acts of heroism and charity, the collective will to win the battle, the stronger sense of community, and the increased understanding of the importance of personal and environmental hygiene.”

Visitors have started coming back to this world famous destination while Hong Kong residents are getting on with business in a cleaner and more caring post-SARS environment. 

HOME-GROWN HEROES

While tourists and business travellers avoided the territory, school children stayed at home and the rest of the community hunkered down, Hong Kong's health workers laboured round the clock to beat SARS. Amid all the suffering and fear that the disease created, they persevered with quiet courage. Their bravery became an example and an inspiration to everyone.

This remarkable group of professionals put their own lives at risk in order to help others at a time when very little was known about the virus. Many were separated from their own families in order to protect their loved ones from coming into contact with the virus. More than a quarter of total cases were medical staff, and some of them paid the ultimate price.

By the time the SARS outbreak had been brought under control, 386 healthcare workers had contracted the disease and eight had died – four doctors, three healthcare assistants and a nurse.

Acknowledging the vital role of the medical fraternity, many donations were specifically targeted to help frontline medical staff, and HWL had no hesitation in contributing HK\$200,000 to the “Hong Kong is Our Home” fund to show its support.

Meanwhile, Mr Li Ka-shing donated one million oranges to all healthcare workers through the Li Ka Shing Foundation, which is a major and long-standing contributor to health-care initiatives in both Hong Kong and the Mainland.

“All front-line medical workers are facing up to unprecedented challenges and enduring a very heavy workload without any complaints,” Mr Li said. “They are doing their very best to serve the public and are demonstrating the highest standards of medical ethics and professionalism.”

The oranges were shipped in from the US and were the



equivalent of around 20 days' supply for all 50,000 healthcare workers.

Other than providing a source of Vitamin C to help boost their immunity, the donation was intended to convey a heartfelt message of support and to show how much the dedication and self-sacrifice of healthcare workers is appreciated.

Hong Kong's medical workers also won the highest praise from the international healthcare community.

Dr David Heymann, Executive Director of Communicable Diseases at the World Health Organization said that with its dense population and fluid border with China, Hong Kong had one of the hardest outbreaks to control.

“Hong Kong benefited from the contribution of its outstanding scientists, epidemiologists, and clinicians, who were at the forefront of efforts to track down source cases in the various clusters, identify the causative agent, develop diagnostic tests and work out treatment protocols,” Dr Heymann said.

Hong Kong also led the way in the control trials of drugs, trying to determine what would work best, Dr Heymann continued, adding that the city's medical professionals had pioneered many of the control measures used to successfully contain smaller outbreaks elsewhere.

“Thanks to the success of Hong Kong the whole world can now feel safer from the SARS threat,” Dr Heymann said.