



HEALTH HAZARD ALERT

SEVERE ACUTE RESPIRATORY SYNDROME (SARS)

Volume 1

Number 1, March 26, 2003

This Health Hazard Alert for OPSEU members is provided to supplement information from Public Health, Health Canada and employers, and explains your rights under the Occupational Health and Safety Act and the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act.

What is SARS and how is it spread?

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) is an atypical pneumonia first recognized in Vietnam in February. The most recent theory published by the U.S. Centres for Disease Control is that it is caused by a new virus known as a coronavirus. However, other experts cite evidence that the cause may be metapneumovirus, known to cause pneumonia in humans.

Infectious diseases experts agree that the most likely route of transmission is via airborne droplets passed from one person to another in close contact. Most reported cases here and around the world are associated with healthcare workers and family members of affected persons.

How many cases are there and what is their status?

Around the world, there have been 456 SARS cases reported. Seventeen have resulted in death. In the Toronto area, Toronto Public Health lists 18 probable cases, five suspected cases and about 25 other cases with some symptoms; there have been three deaths. All other cases (probable, suspected and symptomatic) are described as “stable or improving” or “well.”

While many patients are responding well to treatment, experts are not sure which component of therapy is responsible. Patients are receiving antibiotics, antivirals and symptomatic treatment.

What actions are the Ministry of Health and Toronto Public Health taking?

The Ministry of Health has declared a “health emergency” under the province’s emergency powers legislation to fight the spread of SARS. A central command centre is being set up to coordinate all information from hospitals and health workers on SARS. It will be staffed 24 hours a day.

Toronto Public Health (TPH) is monitoring all probable, suspected and symptomatic cases of SARS. TPH staff are calling everyone who has been in contact with SARS to

check for symptoms, and are supplying masks and thermometers for individuals isolated at home. They have a SARS hotline at 416-338-7600.

How is SARS affecting OPSEU members who work in healthcare facilities?

The main impact to date has been at the Scarborough Hospital: Grace Division, Locals 575 and 581. Three OPSEU members have been admitted to West Park Hospital with symptoms of SARS and another six members are under observation by the Grace's Occupational Health Department for symptoms. Nine nurses from the hospital are also being monitored at West Park.

The chain of infection began earlier in March when the hospital admitted a patient with SARS and cared for him before recognizing the nature of his illness. Apparently, the infected workers either cared for that patient or were in close contact with staff who contracted the virus from the original patient.

The Grace Hospital is not admitting patients. All non-urgent, elective surgeries have been cancelled. Clinic and outpatient appointments are being deferred, relocated or cancelled. These measures will be reassessed at the end of this week. The hospital is considering short-term layoffs.

OPSEU has no reports of members working in other hospitals who have contracted or are suspected of contracting the illness. However, a number of Toronto-area hospitals have reported cases of patients with SARS or who are suspected of having the illness. In those hospitals, workers must wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). For a description of recommended PPE see below.

What precautions are advised for workers who contact a patient with SARS?

Health care workers who have direct contact with a suspected case of SARS are being advised to:

- Wash their hands thoroughly before and after contact with patients, after removing gloves and after contact with materials that may be contaminated with respiratory or other secretions
- Wear gloves and gowns during patient contact
- Wear an occlusive seal, high filtration mask, eg. TB masks labelled as N95.
- Wear eye protection, if spraying or aerosolization of secretions is anticipated.

See the Health Canada Guidelines at: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspss/sars-ssras for more detailed recommendations.

What other precautions should be taken?

Patients suspected of having SARS should be placed in a negative pressure room with the door closed. If there is no negative pressure room available, they should be in a single room with the door closed. Patients should wear a surgical mask or N95 mask when out of their rooms.

What should OPSEU members do if they are unable to work because of the SARS outbreak?

Workers may be off work because:

- They may have been diagnosed with SARS;
- They may be under observation for SARS;
- They may be quarantined at home because of contact with someone with SARS;
- They may be quarantined at home because another family member has been in contact with SARS or has been diagnosed with SARS;
- They may have been sent home because the unit where they work has been closed due to SARS.

In all of these situations, workers should file a claim with the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB). The reason you are not working is because of an illness or the possibility of an illness contracted at the workplace. The WSIB may allow only some of the claims. In some cases your employer may pay you because of the extraordinary circumstances of the outbreak. No one is certain how these cases will be handled.

If you file a claim with WSIB and it is denied and your employer also refuses to pay you for the time you were required to be off, contact your OPSEU staff representative to discuss filing a grievance or a WSIB appeal. The union will assist you.

Do OPSEU members have the Right to Refuse to work with suspected or diagnosed patients with SARS under the Occupational Health & Safety Act?

Under Section 43 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA), workers in healthcare facilities **do not** have the right to refuse unsafe work if the hazard is a normal part of their work or when their refusal directly endangers another person. Healthcare workers **do** have the right to refuse if their refusal does not directly endanger another person and the employer has not taken steps to address the hazards.

It is your employer's responsibility to ensure workers at risk have all the appropriate PPE and understand how to use it to protect themselves. The employer must advise you of the risks, provide the correct respiratory protection (N95 masks), ensure you know how to test the face seal of the mask, provide you with gloves, gowns and eye protection when appropriate, and ensure you wear the equipment when needed. The employer must provide a written infection control policy and protocol.

If you do not have the appropriate PPE or do not understand when or how to use it, you have the right to protect yourself under the OHSA and to exercise your Right to Refuse unsafe work. If you believe your employer is not taking every reasonable precaution to protect your health and safety, and you are considering a work refusal, contact your OPSEU Staff Representative or OPSEU Health and Safety Officer.

For more information, contact OPSEU's Health and Safety Unit: 1-800-268-7376, 416-443-8888, extension 772. Check the OPSEU website at www.opseu.org for future updates.

Useful Links:

Health Canada for updates and Guidelines: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/sars-sras

Toronto Public Health updates: www.toronto.ca/health

Centres for Disease Control: www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars/