

Nova Scotia's new health minister	699
Morgentaler takes on NB	700
New open-access journal	700
Pulse: Fee-for-service v. salary	701
Do generic drugs cost too much?	702
News @ a glance	703

SARS had immense impact on some MDs' practices

SARS has affected many Canadians in the past 5 months, but few of them had to deal with the disease on as many levels as Dr. Rex Verschuren.

The Toronto FP, 1 of 4 doctors practising at the Lapsley Family Doctors Clinic, not only saw a colleague from the practice, 54-year-old Dr. Nestor Yanga, succumb to the disease, but he also watched his 2 other colleagues fall ill as well. As a result, the 42-year-old doctor was left to tend to the clinic's patients on his own for most of the spring and summer.

"The problem wasn't necessarily seeing the patients — it was dealing with all the charts, call-backs and blood work," he explains. "There would be 300 to 400 charts to deal with every day."

Instead of the usual 40 to 50 patients he saw daily, his workload quickly expanded to nearly 160 patients a day, resulting in consultations that lasted an average of 5 minutes.

"Basically, it was just Band-Aiding people for 4 months," he says. "I just adapted and let the small things go."

Fortunately, 1 partner has recovered and was due back the first week of September, while the other is recuperating



Erin Nazar, 5, watches as the funeral procession of Dr. Nestor Yanga passes.

SARS linked genetically to animals in China

A new study has genetically linked the human SARS virus with one found in animals, a finding which suggests that the SARS-like virus jumped from animals to humans. The researchers, whose report was released online by *Science* Sept. 4, say the genome sequences had 99.8% homology to the novel coronavirus (SCoV) that causes SARS in humans. This indicates that the human and animal SCoV-like viruses are closely related.

The researchers studied 7 wild and 1 domestic animal species from different regions in southern China. The animals included civet cats, raccoon-dogs and ferret badgers. The study's 18 authors, from Hong Kong and Guangdong Province in China, noted that all the animal isolates retained a 29-nucleotide sequence, which is not found in most human isolates. They argued that the SCoV-like viruses found in these animals, many of which are sold for meat in China, may be the source of interspecies transmission. The researchers were quick to point out, however, that the animals studied may well have been infected by other animal sources, which remain unknown. They conclude that it is "not clear whether any one or more of these animals are the natural reservoir in the wild."

Klaus Stöhr, head of World Health Organization's influenza program, says this study is important because it confirms that the SARS coronavirus exists outside of humans. However, he says additional cross-sectional studies are required.

Caroline Astell, projects leader for the Michael Smith Genome Sciences Centre in Vancouver, says many questions remain unanswered. "Where did SARS come from? What caused it to jump species? How will we tackle diagnosis and treatment?"

Astell says the study is a red flag. "China should be extremely cautious about lifting the ban on the sale of these animals." — *Allison Gandey, CMAJ*

at home and is expected to return by December.

But the summer's stress clearly took a toll. "I've thought many times of just saying 'forget it,'" Verschuren says. "If it weren't for my partners, I would have just quit and moved on, but I'm trying to keep the practice going for them."

"They're good guys and they're friends, so when they get sick you have a duty to pick up the ball. You can't just sit there and whine about it."

Though he did receive help from local hospitals, Verschuren said he was so busy over the summer that he had scant time to worry about contracting SARS himself. "I figured because of something, maybe it was God's grace or whatever, I survived. I should have got it, since the other doctors did — why I didn't I'll never know."

Yanga was the first North American physician to die from SARS, and his death was a blow to the medical community. OMA President Larry Erlick, who worked with Yanga and returned early from the CMA's annual meeting in Winnipeg to attend his Aug. 19 funeral, says many of Yanga's patients were elderly

members of the Filipino community. "It was really heart-wrenching," says Erlick, who worked with Yanga at the Scarborough Grace Hospital. "Nestor was a dedicated family physician and very hard working — he had a large practice, [and] was very gentle and easygoing."

Yanga contracted SARS in the early stages of the outbreak, before the province-wide institution of safety initiatives surrounding procedures such as intubation.

He entered Toronto's Sunnybrook Hospital Apr. 8, and soon needed help breathing. "There was optimism that he was showing signs of recovery, but certainly there was a long road ahead," Erlick says. "But he had been able to talk to his family, which I thought was very moving since he had been in a drug-induced coma in order to be under a respirator."

Erlick was one of nearly 2000 people who attended the funeral service at St. Michael's Cathedral. Several politicians, including Ontario Health Minister Tony Clement, were also on hand. — *Brad Mackay, Toronto*