

SARS' other toll

Four times as many Ontarians will die from lack of medical attention caused by the SARS outbreak as will die from the disease itself, a University of Toronto infectious disease expert says.

"We estimate now that there have been many other serious health care consequences for people who have not been able to get into hospital [or] get appointments due to [the SARS outbreak]," microbiologist Kelly MacDonald told the 9th International Economic Forum of the Americas in Montreal in May.

"In Ontario, we estimate that the number of deaths [caused because health resources were diverted to fight SARS] will exceed the death rate from SARS fourfold," MacDonald said. As of May 27, 27 SARS-related deaths had been reported in Canada, all in the Toronto area.

MacDonald said the outbreak pointed to "our lack of preparedness and our lack of capacity to deal with a major public health threat, something developing countries face every day.

"Our system doesn't have the ability

to expand to meet demands in Canada. We have a responsibility ... to say this is not good enough."

The cofounder of Doctors Without Border/Médecins Sans Frontières emphasized the global context of public health preparedness. Dr. Bernard Kouchner said the response to SARS was rapid and overwhelming when compared with responses to other diseases. "Four hundred people died and it mobilized the whole Northern hemisphere," said Kouchner, France's former minister of health. "Thousands of kids die of meningitis every year. We know how to diagnose and treat them. I wish we could have done as much for these children as we are doing for people dying of SARS.

"Let's transform this into something positive. It's not enough to say we've done our best in our own country — the reaction has to be worldwide."

As far as industrialized nations are concerned, he added, it is in their best interest to act. "We have SARS today. Tomorrow will bring another disease."

— *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*

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"Sin" tax proposed for junk food

Given that Canadians already pay a hefty "sin" tax on items such as cigarettes and alcohol that are known to affect their health, can Big Macs, potato chips and chocolate bars be far behind? Not if a national watchdog and advocacy association has its way.



Barbara Sibbald

It's a sin

"There is a great burden that consumption of these foods [places] on the health care system," says Bill Jeffery, national coordinator for the Centre for Science in the Public Interest (Canada). "If this is posing such a burden, Canadians should be ready to pay for the increased financial toll."

The group wants Canadians to start paying sin taxes on "unhealthy" foods and, conversely, to avoid taxes on "healthy" foods. The tax would apply at both grocery stores and restaurants.

Dr. Eldon Smith of Calgary, editor of the *Canadian Journal of Cardiology* and a member of the council of the Canadian Cardiovascular Society, sees some merit in the proposal. "Right now, items like fresh produce are very expensive while colas, Kraft dinner and a Big Mac are very affordable. There is a systematic differential in the price of healthy versus unhealthy foods." — *Louise Gagnon, Ottawa*

eCMAJ's top 10 — April

Following is the list of *eCMAJ* articles that attracted the greatest reader interest in April. Six of the 10 are fast-tracked articles released early on our Web site in response to Canada's SARS outbreak.

1. Ribavirin in the treatment of SARS: A new trick for an old drug? – 13 118 hits
2. SARS: prudence, not panic – 10 527
3. Identification and containment of an outbreak of SARS in a community hospital – 6514
4. Diagnosis and treatment of diabetic ketoacidosis and the hyperglycemic hyperosmolar state – 4530
5. The immediate psychological and occupational impact of the 2003 SARS outbreak in a teaching hospital – 4219
6. Paracentesis through an umbilical hernia – 4151
7. Risks and benefits of hormone replacement therapy: The evidence speaks – 4140
8. 2002 clinical practice guidelines for the diagnosis and management of osteoporosis in Canada – 3652
9. SARS update – 3328
10. Containing a new infection with new technology: a Web-based response to SARS – 3312

This list is updated monthly and posted at www.cmaj.ca/misc/topdocs.shtml. — *CMAJ*