



“On the ground reflections: Lessons Learned from SARS and how they apply to COVID-19”

In 2003, Ken McDonald was a Registered Nurse working at Surrey Memorial Hospital at the forefront of the SARS crisis. British Columbia was already on high alert for SARS by early April of that year when Surrey Memorial established an Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) when a nurse working at another hospital became ill after coming into contact with a SARS patient.

It is important to note that by 2003, BC was already on the leading edge of pandemic preparation having established a plan in the 1990s over concern for new influenza strains originating in Asia. It was during the 1990's that hospital staff were trained in fitting N95 respirator masks and in the use of other personal protective equipment (PPE). When SARS was over, the Ontario SARS Commission looked to British Columbia as a model of proper pandemic preparation because it was contained so quickly here. Protocols such as the use of N95 masks and PPE in addition to quickly isolating sick patients meant that SARS did not spread here the way it did in Toronto where healthcare workers were infected. In fact, in BC only one healthcare worker, the aforementioned nurse, was infected.

These hard-learned lessons, particularly those out of BC, have been ingrained across hospitals all over Canada. Preparedness is key, protocols matter and ensuring that healthcare workers at the point of care are informed is paramount.

For Ken these lessons and others, such as the use of negative pressure rooms used to prevent cross-contamination, represent good practice and served as building blocks to help with future outbreaks. Back in 2003, Ken certainly did not foresee the COVID-19 pandemic we are dealing with today, but the lessons carry forward. “This was a long time ago and COVID and SARS are not the same but there are principles that we can all stand behind to help us weather this crisis”, notes Ken.

Here are some of his recommendations:

- **Be informed:** Know the evidence out there and commit time regularly to reviewing the emerging standards and protocols. For example, Ken has scheduled three times a day to scan his resources for updates.
- **Get ready for tough decisions:** Know that you may have to make tough decisions and try to think in advance about who, how, when you will consult for various types of guidance before it is needed.
- **Manage attitudes and stress:** Managing attitudes and feelings during these high stress times takes considerable energy and can drain you quickly. Therefore, mental sustainability should be an explicit part of your own planning and consideration when dealing with patients and colleagues.
- **Be communicative:** Open communication with your leaders is critical. This is not the time to be shy, keep the lines open and ask questions if you have them.

Ken McDonald is now a Clinical Nurse Specialist working in the Fraser Health Authority and serves on the RN Council of NNPBC.

