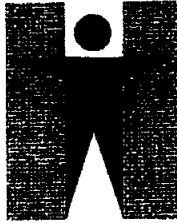


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CONFIDENTIAL

20 April 2004

Miss Flora TAI
Clerk to Select Committee
Legislative Council
Legislative Council Building
8 Jackson Road
Central
Hong Kong
(Fax No.: 2248 2011)

(Total : 1 + 4 pages)

Dear Miss Tai,

**Select Committee to inquire into the handling of
the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome outbreak by
the Government and the Hospital Authority**

I submit my witness statement as request by the LegCo Select Committee.

Yours sincerely,

(Dr Thomas TSANG)
Consultant Community Medicine
(Communicable Disease)
Department of Health

Encl.

Written statement by Dr Thomas Tsang ho-fai

The following statement is written to the best of my accuracy in recollecting events and conversations that transpired at the meeting on 5 April 2003 referred to by the LegCo Select Committee in its letter dated 8 April 2004.

In the morning of April 5, 2003, I went to a meeting called by Health, Welfare, and Food Bureau (HWFB) at Murray Building. I departed from my office at the Department of Health (DH) and was accompanied by Dr Paul Saw. Dr Saw informed me that some rat droppings collected at Amoy Gardens were found to have positive polymerase chain reaction (PCR) to coronavirus.

When I arrived at the meeting room, I found Dr Stephen Ng present. Dr SV Lo and Dr Trevor Ellis arrived later. The meeting commenced when Dr EK Yeoh came in.

I had prepared an updated epidemic curve for the Amoy Gardens outbreak and some epidemiological information for members' discussion at the meeting. We noted that the peak of the outbreak had already passed and the shape of the epidemic curve in Block E was point-source like. Cases in Block E had disease onset a few days preceding other blocks. Preliminary findings by the multi-disciplinary investigation team suggested that a contaminated sewage system might have resulted in the outbreak.

The meeting was later joined by Mr MC Yuen, who presented the findings at Amoy Gardens in relation to rats. He explained there were two types of rats (sewer rats and roof rats) which had different habitats. There were not many rat signs in the common areas of Amoy Gardens.

The rat dropping results were discussed. Dr Ng opined that an infected population of rats caused the outbreak. Members discussed the meaning of the positive PCR results, whether SARS virus was actively multiplying in rats, and whether rats were only passively carrying virus material around as a result of environmental contamination. The best way to distinguish this would be to conduct autopsies on rats trapped to look for active signs of infection.

When the meeting ended, I prepared myself to present the Amoy Gardens investigations at a meeting chaired by the Chief Executive held later in the afternoon.

With respect to the issues listed in the Appendix IV to the letter to me from the LegCo Select Committee dated 8 April 2004, I provide my responses as follows.

When were the attendees told of the test results of the rat dropping and throat swab and what was their reaction?

I was told about the test results by Dr Saw the same morning before the meeting started. The test results were discussed among other attendees at the meeting. Dr Ng seemed convinced that an infected population of rats had caused the outbreak. I was a little puzzled about this hypothesis as it did not fit the observations in the field investigation at that time. Members discussed the meaning of the positive PCR results, whether SARS virus was actively multiplying in rats, and whether rats were only passively carrying virus material around as a result of environmental contamination. I think members were concerned about this new finding and they wanted to find out its significance as soon as possible.

Who sent Dr Trevor Ellis to perform the autopsies on rats trapped the night before?

I cannot recall who sent Dr Trevor Ellis to perform the autopsies on rats trapped the night before. Dr Ellis left the meeting before it ended to go back to perform the autopsies.

When did Dr Yeoh join the meeting?

Dr Yeoh came after Dr Stephen Ng, Dr Paul Saw, Dr SV Lo, Dr Trevor Ellis, and me. Dr Yeoh arrived before Mr MC Yuen.

When did Mr Yuen arrive at the meeting? Was he summoned to the meeting by Dr Yeoh? If yes, why was he summoned to the meeting?

Mr Yuen came in last. He was summoned by Dr Yeoh to the meeting to present his observations about rats at Amoy Gardens, and to give expert advice on issues related to rodent control.

Was there any discussion on the ramifications on the spread of SARS by rats?

I have no recollection about specific comments on the ramifications on the spread of

SARS by rats, including Dr Ng's claim about Dr Yeoh mentioning riots.

Was there any discussion on the killing of rats?

I recall that Mr Yuen briefed members about the trapping of rats in Amoy Gardens, and Dr Yeoh directed to extend rat control activities to the neighboring areas of Amoy Gardens.

Did Dr NG suggest that rats which were virus positive should be kept alive to observe how long the virus stayed in them?

I cannot recall.

Was there any discussion on what to say to the public about the investigation on rats? Did Dr Yeoh give instruction to stop the investigation on rats?

Dr Yeoh asked members not to disclose the test results to the public at that juncture before their true significance was known. Premature disclosure of this information might mislead the public. I expressed that we could not keep this information confidential for long. Dr Yeoh directed that rodent control measures be stepped up and extended to neighboring areas of Amoy Gardens. I do not recall Dr Yeoh giving instructions to stop the investigation on rats. Dr Yeoh did not stop Dr Ellis from doing rat autopsies.

Did Dr Yeoh request everyone at the meeting to keep the rat findings confidential? Did Dr Yeoh send someone to call Dr Ellis to stop performing the autopsies on rats?

See above.

Was there any discussion on the evacuation of all the residents of Amoy Gardens? Did Dr Yeoh make any statement to the effect that the residents of Amoy Gardens would have to be sacrificed?

I do not recall any discussion on the evacuation of all the residents of Amoy Gardens. I do not recall Dr Yeoh making any statement at the meeting with regard to sacrificing the residents of Amoy Gardens.

Did Dr Ng suggest warning people to keep their premises rat-safe by closing windows and covering their food? Was Dr Ng involved in the investigation into the outbreak at Amoy Gardens? Did Dr Ng stay until the end of the meeting on 5 April 2003?

I recall Dr Ng suggested warning people to keep out their houses from rats, but I cannot recall the specifics. Dr Ng did not join the Government's field investigation team at Amoy Gardens. I cannot recall whether Dr Ng stayed until the end of the meeting.

What was the purpose of Dr Lo's Call to Dr Ng on 8 April 2003?

I am not aware of Dr Lo's call to Dr Ng at the material time.