

Columbia Researchers May Help Slow Spread of SARS

Fall 2003

Two Columbia infectious-disease specialists, W. Ian Lipkin, MD, and Thomas Briese, MD, were the main attractions at a Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) prevention seminar in Beijing last May. The two performed a live demonstration of their new SARS diagnostic test before an audience of military scientists.

The scientists, invited guests of the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology, were seen as potential saviors to millions of people suffering from SARS. The Columbia-developed test, a process known as polymerase chain reaction (PCR) analysis, detects the coronavirus that causes SARS in genetic material. Such early detection can be key to halting the disease's spread by ensuring timely quarantine and treatment. The University filed a patent application for the test last April.

Before they returned home, Lipkin, the Jerome L. and Dawn Greene Professor of Epidemiology, and Briese, an associate professor of clinical epidemiology, donated 10,000 of their test kits.

The pneumonia-like phenomenon now called SARS has been known in southern China for more than a year. It seized the rest of the world's attention, and acquired its name, in February, when outbreaks occurred in other parts of the world, most notably in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Canada. Marked by a high fever, dry cough, difficulty in breathing, and, sometimes, diarrhea, the disease infected nearly 8,500 people in its first eight months, reported the World Health Organization, killing more than 800.

Lipkin, named Special Advisor to China for Scientific Research and International Cooperation in the Fight Against SARS by a grateful Chinese government, returned to Beijing in July to chair the government-sponsored International Science Symposium on SARS. According to a report in the official *People's Daily* newspaper,

Lipkin told the 300 attendees that “scientists participating in the international anti-SARS co-operation have set an example for the world community in combating future common disasters.”



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