



BC Centre for Disease Control

May 2, 2003

Epilogue: China Airlines Passengers' Illness due to Influenza, not SARS

The Fraser Health Authority and the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control have confirmed that 21 people linked to the China Airlines flights from New Delhi to Vancouver via Taipei on April 19th have been released from isolation. Influenza has been identified in a number of the specimens that were tested in the BCCDC laboratory.

Fifteen of this group of people had travelled on the April 19th flight and developed fever and cough shortly after arrival in BC. They became suspect SARS cases because Taiwan is considered a SARS-affected area by the World Health Organization; however, they had only spent 1 hour at Taipei airport.

Six household contacts became ill with fever and a cough shortly after contact with their ill relatives.

8 of the 11 persons in this group on whom laboratory specimens were received for testing have tested positive for influenza A virus. Influenza circulates year round in the tropics, although it is uncommon in temperate parts of the world outside of the winter season. None of the specimens tested positive for the human coronavirus believed to cause SARS.

The diagnosis of influenza in this group is in keeping with the clinical syndrome of fever and cough which did not progress to severe respiratory illness in any of the cases, travel to India which is not known to be a SARS affected area, influenza infection in India, short influenza-like incubation periods observed in the households where transmission occurred, a high number of secondary cases in the households, rapid resolution of the illness after 48 hours, and no identification of additional suspect cases among the almost 250 passengers on the Taipei to Vancouver flight who were contacted and interviewed.

This experience underscores the value of developing and making available rapid tests which check for all respiratory viruses, from influenza to the SARS-associated coronavirus. It is important to note that most returning travellers with a fever and cough, even from affected areas, will turn out not to have SARS. Nevertheless, public health in British Columbia will continue to take a cautious approach to people entering the country from high risk areas with symptoms of fever or respiratory infection. This cautious approach will result in inconvenient isolation for persons who will turn out to have the regular flu or other non-SARS viral infections – but it's the best way we have right now of preventing the spread of SARS.