**SCMP Article**

**Honesty is best policy in any virus outbreak**

A few weeks ago, a private clinic in Tsing Yi MTR station alerted authorities to a possible case of Middle East respiratory syndrome. According to reports, a woman who had recently visited South Korea went to the clinic with flu-like symptoms. She was taken to hospital, and health workers sealed off the clinic for sterilisation.

It was a big story for a few days. It actually contained some reassuring news. Tests showed the woman to be clear of the disease. The event also showed that the systems we have in place worked well. The clinic's staff followed procedures, and the public health officials took the necessary measures.

However, there was a more negative side. Word spread very quickly on social media. The shopping mall next to Tsing Yi MTR station was deserted at one stage, probably because people were alarmed by photos of health workers there in special protective suits. More people with possible symptoms were referred to hospitals, and so the number of "suspected cases" increased.

Rumours about genuine cases began in online social media, such as a chat site catering to mothers with babies. Messages starting circulating online not only about avoiding travel to South Korea, but also keeping away from places in Hong Kong where Koreans might congregate. In fact, there were no confirmed cases here.

Anyone who remembers the severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak in early 2003 is likely to get nervous about an infectious disease hitting Hong Kong. It is a good thing to be alert and aware of possible dangers - it may even be that nervous behaviour like avoiding a mall could help reduce infections if the disease really struck. But it also makes Hong Kong people prone to panic. And social media can create and transmit panic almost instantly.

The best way to minimise panic and rumours is for the authorities and other people involved in a crisis or incident to be totally honest about what is happening.

In South Korea, the disease probably spread at first because of faulty hospital procedures in managing patients and visitors. When the first Mers cases were found there, officials took the decision not to release the names of the affected hospitals.

The result was that false information started to spread quickly online.

My company owns an interest in a large private hospital in Bangkok. The hospital serves patients from around the world, including the Middle East. And at around the same time Hong Kong was going into a panic, the hospital found that a Middle Eastern patient actually had Mers. It was the first confirmed case in Thailand.

The hospital had to perform several tests over several days on the man before being sure that he had Mers. There is an established protocol for dealing with a patient with an infectious disease, and the hospital has the facilities and skills to carry it out - many employees and the patient had to be quarantined. And the hospital and Thai government authorities were completely open with the public about what was going on. The man was transferred to a specialised institute and survived.

While this was happening, I was approached by a Hong Kong newspaper and asked whether any Hong Kong people could have been a patient at the hospital in Bangkok. It was possible, in theory. There was certainly a chance that some Hongkongers might have been there as outpatients having check-ups.

The newspaper wanted an alarming angle for the story: a Hong Kong person could have been exposed to Mers - and the paper did run that as a story. In fairness, our press did a good job of conveying reassuring information to the public after the suspected Tsing Yi case.

The lesson I get from all this is that hospitals and public authorities absolutely must be completely open. It is essential that the public trusts official information, whether the news is good or bad. That is the only way to make sure stories and rumours on social media have less credibility and potential to spread panic.