

Malik Peiris

If battling a viral illness for a week can be tiring, being consumed by it for years can be downright exhausting. Still, Malik Peiris labors on in his quest to conquer the elusive infections.

Malik Peiris really needs a holiday. The Hong Kong–based virologist has always been busy, but since December 2002, he has grappled with crisis after crisis. First, there was severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), which surfaced as a mysterious pneumonia-like illness, then bird flu, then SARS again, then more bird flu . . . and on and on.

When reports of SARS first emerged in the Guangdong province of China, Peiris was away with his family on Christmas vacation and had to rush back—and that pattern has held ever since. “I’ve taken a few days [off] here and a few days there, but every time I go on vacation something happens,” he says.

The outbreaks brought a whirlwind of activity, recognition and the world’s attention to Peiris and the first-rate team he has assembled at Hong Kong University since his arrival there in 1995. They also presented fascinating scientific puzzles at his doorstep. But to say that he is exhausted is an understatement.

“On a personal level, I would really like some peace and quiet from infectious disease for the next two to three years so we can all catch our breath a bit,” he says. “From December 2002 up to now, actually, the pressure has been unrelenting.”

In person, however, Peiris belies little of his weariness. Even through incessant interruptions, he is quiet, unassuming and thoughtful—and, many say, the calm eye in the maelstrom of Asia’s infectious diseases.

Peiris and Guan Yi, who joined the university in 2000, had been keeping a close watch for bird flu, particularly for the H5N1 strain that first made news in 1997. Early reports in the winter of 2002 were that ducks, geese and swans in Hong Kong were dying. Because the influenza virus is normally asymptomatic in aquatic birds, the scientists were concerned that the virus had altered for the worse. Then, early in 2003, when media reports from Guangdong began sounding the alarm about an unusual illness, the researchers instantly stepped up surveillance in Hong Kong. Everyone was sure the culprit was a flu virus.

Researchers in Hong Kong and at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) raced to test the virus in every known cell culture. Eventually, they hit paydirt and identified the SARS coronavirus.

“Let’s get this straight—Malik is the one who discovered SARS, not the CDC, not someone else. They were all behind,” says avian influenza expert Robert Webster. “We all thought it was bird flu. He is the one that identified SARS.”

But Peiris is not one to claim credit. In interviews, he repeatedly extols his colleagues’ contributions and seems distinctly uncomfortable with the idea of being the center of attention.

“Malik is the power behind the throne in Hong Kong,” says Webster. “But he promotes other people.” When the two recently traveled together to Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia, for instance, Peiris won the confidence of researchers they met in those countries, Webster says. “You end up trusting Malik and believing that he will deliver for you.”

Webster attributes Peiris’ generosity to his cultural roots in Sri Lanka. But even among Sri Lankan scientists, Peiris is noted for being easygoing.

“One of Malik’s assets is his great capacity to collaborate with people and work as a team. He gets on very nicely with people,” says Sarathnanda ‘Chubby’ Arsecularatne, Peiris’ mentor and, later, his father-in-law. “That’s a very important aspect to Malik that has defined his success.”

As a non-Chinese leader of a lab in China, Peiris is sometimes in a delicate position, but Webster and others say he handles the situation with aplomb. His colleague Guan, who holds a junior position at the university, manages operations on the mainland and shares grants and responsibility for the team.

In many ways, the two researchers could not be more different. “Malik is a pretty quiet person, a good gentleman,” says Guan. “His personal style is more UK-like. I am more American style. American style is very aggressive. British working is more political, more gentle,” Guan says.

Guan likes venturing into the field, where Peiris is essentially a lab biologist, interested in unraveling infectious-disease mechanisms. Although he trained in medicine, in 1974, Peiris joined the microbiology department at the University of Peradeniya, then called the University of Ceylon.

The department lacked a virologist, so Peiris set up a virology laboratory. “Straight away, he got on to some important research,” recalls Arsecularatne, who is emeritus professor of microbiology at the university. “I pinned my hopes on him because he is one of those people who are so early emphatic in their interest in research,” says Arsecularatne. Although research in most resource-poor third-world countries is difficult, Peiris consistently did good work, Arsecularatne says. “Malik amply justified my expectations. I’m very proud of him.”

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In 1977, Peiris began working at the University of Oxford on the mechanisms of dengue hemorrhagic fever. When he returned to Sri Lanka in 1982, he set up a virology department at Peradeniya. “Except maybe for the SARS story, what I’m most proud of is what I managed to do during those six years in Sri Lanka,” Peiris says.

Peiris then went to work at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne and, in 1995, joined Hong Kong University. Still, he continues to visit Sri Lanka twice a year and in his lectures there, always emphasizes the importance of research on diseases that affect the country. Asked if he feels compelled to return to Sri Lanka, Peiris says, “I do feel an obligation, but equally there are some important things that can be done from a place like Hong Kong.”

Peiris is indeed needed in Hong Kong to keep an eye on SARS—which he says is likely to pop up unpredictably—and bird flu, which he predicts will reemerge in the winter. Of the two, influenza is a bigger threat, but a more familiar enemy, he says.

Somewhere in between, he would also like to make time for all the things he has had to brush aside in the past two years: books, music, art, travel, simple walks and—most important—his wife and two children. And he fervently hopes that SARS and bird flu are staggered enough to give him and his colleagues enough room to collect their wits.

“Either one is bad enough on its own, but if they were to emerge in the human population at the same time—I dare not think of it,” he says. “I don’t think nature would be so unkind. I hope.”

Apoorva Mandavilli, Hong Kong