

Nothing to fear but fear itself

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Confirmed COVID-19 cases in Hubei Province, the epicenter of the outbreak, yesterday surged to nearly 60,000 after the Chinese National Health Commission revised its diagnostic methods to test for the virus.

With an unknown number of undiagnosed people quarantined in their homes and millions of migrant workers in the process of returning to cities following the end of the extended Lunar New Year holiday, reports earlier this week of a decline in the number of new cases in China might prove to be a false dawn.

Many experts are warning it could be months before the outbreak is brought under control.

This makes it all the more vital that the public in Taiwan is kept well informed, and that information on preventive measures is accurate and fact-based.

There has already been panic buying of masks, despite medical advice that maintaining good hygiene, especially hand washing, as well as regular exercise, are more effective ways to prevent infection.

Several recent events have given additional cause for concern that the message is not getting through:

A multiplex in Taipei's Neihu District (新湖) on Monday evening announced on Facebook that as of Tuesday it would implement a "seat separation rule" in all of its theaters, meaning that all reservations would be separated by an aisle or an empty seat on either side.

The multiplex proudly posted a graphic of an indicative seating plan with "Xs" marking empty seats, similar to an airplane seating reservation map.

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While some netizens questioned whether this would have any benefit, others praised the new seating arrangements.

“That’s so considerate,” one said, while another said: “Good. Now I don’t need to worry whether I’ll get infected by the person next to me.”

This is problematic on many levels. The government has repeatedly urged the public to avoid crowded, enclosed spaces until the outbreak is no longer a threat. Movie theaters fall into this category.

Furthermore, if you were unlucky enough to be sitting next to an infected person, there is no evidence to suggest that maintaining a distance of the width of the average movie theater seat would prevent you from catching the virus.

It appears to be a clever, but cynical marketing ploy by the multiplex’s management to fill theaters at a time when many people are eschewing trips to the movies.

The government has generally been doing a good job in keeping the public abreast of the latest developments, with the Central Epidemic Command Center holding daily news conferences, while prosecutors have been trying to clamp down on disinformation and fake news on the Internet.

In spite of this, the public continues to worry, lining up outside drugstores for hours to get hold of their weekly ration of two masks.

Stoking anxieties, nuclear power advocate Huang Shih-hsiu (黃士修) on Tuesday claimed on Facebook that 1 million masks are disappearing daily down a “black hole.”

Perhaps the government could take a leaf out of Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s book, who in a nine-minute address to the nation on Sunday said: “Fear can do more

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harm than the virus itself.”

Lee advocated exercise and good hygiene, and promised to keep the public informed “every step of the way.”

Bloomberg reported the speech appeared to have an immediate impact, with long lines at supermarkets in the city-state returning to normal.

President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) should consider emulating Lee and providing regular addresses to the nation.

As Franklin Roosevelt said in his 1933 US presidential inaugural address: “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2020/02/14](#)