

# INFECTIOUS DISEASE

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From ancient times, human civilization has borne the brunt of the scourge of infectious diseases. Historical texts tell of epidemics of leprosy, tuberculosis, smallpox and diphtheria. Man, in his bid to manage these diseases, sought to understand the natural history of these pathogens, and devised ways to limit the spread and extent of these epidemics.

Many of the lessons learnt, of isolation and contact tracing, were once again very useful as we faced novel and deadly new diseases in the 21st century. The emergent diseases we have encountered in the past 10 years, like SARS, Mers-Cov, and Ebola, have presented great challenges to human society. The first line of defence has been the good public health practices that we learnt from lessons past.

The chapter on emerging diseases is most enlightening, and highlights the important role family physicians play when such an epidemic affects us. Remember SARS: a terrifying experience for all, especially for those in the frontline.

With the advent of antibiotics, we have enjoyed for almost a century the ability to manage infections that normally would have meant a rapid and painful demise. However, how long we enjoy this advantage remains to be seen as antibiotic resistance becomes more prevalent and bacteria gain pan resistance to all antibiotics. Even malaria resistance is getting worrying. The

selection of the appropriate antimalarial is evolving rapidly, and this is well covered in this issue too.

Prevention is better than cure, and how better to do that than vaccinations for children, at a time when they are particularly vulnerable to infectious agents. Many new vaccinations have been introduced, and these are discussed at length in Unit 3. A section on childhood exanthemas is also included; well written and concise, it serves as a superlative refresher.

The section on adult vaccination highlights the common adult vaccinations available today. With increasing antimicrobial resistance in the community, it is good that there is development in vaccines that can reduce the reliance on antimicrobials.

It used to be that only the wealthy and business traveller could afford to go overseas. In this day and age, air travel is relatively inexpensive, and many travel to exotic destinations for work and holidays. Unit 5 on travel vaccines addresses these issues and is an excellent guide for managing international travellers.

Last but not least, the importance of limiting the spread of infectious disease is important, especially for healthcare workers in office-based settings. Family physicians are in the frontline, and they and their staff are at higher risk of infectious spread. Unit 6 focuses on three diseases, namely influenza, pneumococcal disease and tuberculosis.

Infectious disease will always be with us. At present, we still have the upper hand, but the march of antimicrobial resistance is slowly eroding whatever advantage we have. This edition of the SFP is a timely refocus on what is a most important and relevant concern for us in the 21st century.

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