The woman in the emergency ward of a Canadian hospital has no idea of her ultimate fate. Just a bad cold, she thinks—what a way to return from a trip to Asia. Within a week, the woman has died, a victim of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). The nurse and doctor who took care of the woman, and a receptionist who handed the woman forms to fill out, will soon be in critical care.

SARS, a viral respiratory illness, is transmitted by person-to-person contact. First reported in Asia in February 2003, the illness spread over the next few months to more than two dozen countries in North America, South America, Europe, and Asia. During the SARS outbreak of 2003, a total of 8098 people worldwide became sick, according to the World Health Organization; of these, 774 died. In the United States, there were 192 infected individuals, all of whom recovered. Public health officials used isolation and quarantine measures to control the outbreak of this infectious disease.

But the story doesn’t end there. On 13 January 2004, the US Department of Health and Human Services banned import of civets—small catlike mammals related to the mongoose and native to Africa and the East Indies—whether...