Annelies Wilder-Smith

Although now a Professor of Emerging Infectious Diseases at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Annelies Wilder-Smith did not seek out a career in emerging infectious diseases. Her career goal had always been tropical and travel medicine, “but emerging infectious diseases came to me”, she tells The Lancet Infectious Diseases. She faced the first severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak when living in Asia in 2003. “When COVID-19 emerged, I asked my husband: why must we go through a SARS-like outbreak twice in our lifetime?”

Born in Singapore, her family returned to Europe for her father’s career and she grew up in the Netherlands and Germany. “I’d always wanted to be a doctor since age 10 and wanted to return to Asia one day”, recalls Wilder-Smith. After finishing her medical training in Germany, she and her husband neurologist Einar Wilder-Smith researched leprosy in Papua New Guinea and Nepal, to identify household contacts at highest risk of later developing the disease. The next stop was China, where they worked as volunteer doctors in Sichuan for 2 years, before settling in Singapore. “Singapore is a unique location in Asia that allowed me to initiate various NGO projects in India and China”, explains Wilder-Smith.

The couple stayed in Singapore for 18 years, raising their two children and developing their careers. Wilder-Smith completed her training in tropical and travel medicine with specialization in public health. She was soon appointed head of the Traveller’s Vaccination Clinic in Singapore, along with becoming professor in public health at the National University of Singapore, and later at the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine. After just one month in post, she was successful in containing it.”

Now 17 years after SARS, and living in Europe again (in Luzern, Switzerland), Wilder-Smith is working on the response to COVID-19. During a teleconference in early January 2020, she listened to a Chinese colleague describe this new disease. “It sounded exactly like the first SARS”, she says. “All my alarm bells went off.” She wishes that western Europe and the USA had responded earlier. “I wanted us to crush it, as we did with SARS, but we were being accused of creating panic.” She is currently focusing all her efforts on being consultant to WHO’s Immunization and Vaccination Department to advance various vaccine candidates. “We really need several of these vaccines to be successful, to leverage upon the different vaccine characteristics and their advantages”, she explains. She concludes that “How our societies respond to the current COVID-19 health, economic and political crisis will determine the moral underpinning of the next generation.”

“Having worked closely with Annelies in co-ordinating large global research consortia on infectious diseases, it’s impossible to miss her high-energy approach to team-building and her determination to drive productivity”, says Peter Byass, professor of global health at Umeå University, Sweden. “Infectious disease specialists with a truly global outlook like Annelies are important players in today’s world, and her contributions in this field, plus her mentorship of younger colleagues, are significant.”

Tony Kirby