As SARS toll climbed, so did economic cost to Toronto

No one yet knows Canada’s final health toll from severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), but officials in Ontario already know the financial tab will be huge.

As soon as news broke about the first fatalities — a Chinese mother and son living in Scarborough — consumer traffic in the city’s Asian communities dropped precipitously. Businesses in both of Toronto’s downtown-area Chinatowns and in the Pacific Mall have reported traffic decreases of between 70% and 90% since the outbreak began in mid-March. In fact, things had become so unsettled by early April that Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and other politicians trekked to Chinatown in an attempt to prove it was safe.

The same anxiety led to shortages of face masks and antibacterial soap at many drug stores and medical supply firms. The subsequent images of masked city workers, when combined with intense media coverage, led to a rash of conference cancellations. Hotels reported millions of dollars in cancelled reservations, including 1 major cancer care convention.

Entrepreneurs were quick to cash in — SARS travel protection kits, which included masks, gloves, pocket-sized bottles of hand wash and herbal remedies to boost the immune system, were soon selling on the Internet for US$49. — Brad Mackay, Toronto

Police still investigating sniper attacks on MDs

James Kopp has been found guilty of murdering New York state obstetrician Dr. Barnett Slepian, but police are still trying to close other cases involving Canadian physicians who were shot.

Kopp remains a suspect in the non-fatal shootings of physicians who provided abortions in Winnipeg, Vancouver and Ancaster, Ont. He has been charged in the last case — Dr. Hugh Short was shot in the right arm as he sat in his home Nov. 10, 1995 (CMAJ 1998;159[9]:1153-5) — but there is insufficient evidence linking him to the Winnipeg or Vancouver cases.

“The important thing for us is to get closure for the victims here,” says Winnipeg police Inspector KeithMcCaskill, who serves on a national task force created to solve the crimes. McCaskill, who is working with state and federal prosecutors in the US, says Kopp probably won’t be tried for his Canadian crimes because the murder in the US takes precedence.

Kopp, 48, is expected to be sentenced this month to life imprisonment with no parole eligibility for 25 years. That could change, because he also faced additional federal charges that may eliminate the possibility of parole.

Kopp admitted shooting Slepian in his suburban home near Buffalo on Oct. 23, 1998. Slepian, 52, was the last of 7 Americans killed in attacks on abortion clinics and abortion providers from 1993 to 1998. — Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ