

The Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) outbreak in South Korea in 2015 was first initiated by patient zero, who departed from Bahrain arriving in Korea. His main purpose of the stay was to work for plantation harvest in Bahrain, but after 7 days upon his arrival in Korea, he showed symptoms of high fever up to 38 degrees Celsius (about 100.4 Fahrenheit) and coughing.<sup>1</sup> These symptoms coincide with the MERS case definition from a medical publication, which first defined MERS symptoms as “an asymptomatic or mild respiratory illness to severe pneumonia and multi-organ failure; overall mortality is around 35.7%”<sup>2</sup> The researchers defined the origin of MERS-CoV back to “dromedary camels, including some with respiratory symptoms...epidemiologically linked humans and camels, confirming inter-transmission, most probably from camels to humans.”<sup>3</sup> Because MERS coronavirus is originated from camels, experts narrowed down the viral origins to be near Eastern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, until patient zero has reached Korea leading to further contamination. Regarding this infectious disease that has 35.7% mortality rate, the following governmental response containing this outbreak was not sufficient which caused a radical spread of the disease. Following the outbreak, the government decided to conceal crucial information about MERS, which exacerbated the citizen’s panic. This outbreak and inadequate governmental response, unable to contain the disease and obscuring information about MERS, eventually led to the citizens’ distrust in the Korean government.

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<sup>1</sup> Hangi Seo, “국내 메르스 사태 일지 [Domestic Log of MERS Situation],” *Yunhap News* (Seoul, South Korea), Sept. 08, 2018. <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20180908044400017>

<sup>2</sup> Omrani AS, Al-Tawfiq JA, and Memish ZA, “Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV): Animal to Human Interaction,” *Pathogens and Global Health* 109, no.8 (2015): 354-62. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26924345>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Abstract

The Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare was far from prepared for this situation, diagnosing the disease late and unable to prevent further contamination. When patient zero showed symptoms, he received a consultation and moved to 4 different medical facilities in total before he was diagnosed with MERS. By then, two patients had already contracted MERS, and 64 more family members, as well as medical team members, were at risk.<sup>4</sup> Among the additional patients, one of the patients was suspicious about their symptoms, and even though the medical team advised him to not leave, the patient left for a business trip to China. This patient was later confirmed to have MERS, and in China and Hong Kong, 56 people who came in close contact with him had to be quarantined.<sup>5</sup> As a result, 682 people were subjected to isolation in less than a month after the first diagnosis. One of the many cases of hazardous occasions where the patient left the “recommended” quarantine was when a doctor with a definite diagnosis of MERS attended an event with 1500 attendees. After this event, the city of Seoul acquired the attendee list and contacted the all names on this list for voluntary home isolation treatment.<sup>6</sup> For initial progress of the 2015 MERS outbreak, some say that the government had failed to adhere to the lesson that should be learned from the Red Queen hypothesis, proposed by biologist L. Van Valen in 1973, where “for an evolutionary system, continuing development is needed just in order to maintain its fitness relative to the systems it is coevolving with.”<sup>7</sup> Based on Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, that “in this place it takes all the running you can do, to

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<sup>4</sup> Seo, 5.21

<sup>5</sup> Seo, 6.1

<sup>6</sup> Jisun Kim, “의사가 ‘자가 격리’ 어기고 행사 참석 [Doctor Breaks Quarantine to Attend Social Event].” *KBS News* (Seoul, South Korea), Jun. 04, 2015. <http://news.kbs.co.kr/news/view.do?ncd=3089207>

<sup>7</sup> F. Heylighen, “The Red Queen Principle,” *Principia Cybernetica Web*, August 1993. <http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/REDQUEEN.html>.

keep in the same place,”<sup>8</sup> this hypothesis suggests that in order to overpower the other coevolving species, one must work tirelessly just to match the evolving speed; to overpower it one must work exponentially. In the case of the MERS-CoV outbreak, the Korean government should have worked harder to track, contain, and fight against this disease, but they failed to do so. On May 23rd, the Minister of Health and Welfare recognized the government’s fault and publicly apologized, stating that “there were minimal information about MERS, so the responsive measure according to the World Health Organization’s manual was followed...but were unable to resolve the situation in early stages.”<sup>9</sup> To this response referring back to the World Health Organization’s manual, others criticized that the absence of the command center as well as the dismissal of the warning about the mass hospital outbreak was the Korean government’s fault. Instead of working harder to stop the outbreak, the Korean government remained idle, causing the public to grow more concerned about the growing rate of MERS patients.

Withholding information on medical facilities and information about the disease itself from the public was pivotal to the public losing faith in the government. The government did not initially disclose the names of the medical facilities that had contacted patient zero and other patients with a definite diagnosis. The Minister of Health and Welfare stated that, “Avoiding the hospital that was visited by MERS patients is an excessive fear” further elaborating his reasoning that, “if the name of the medical facility is revealed, the visitors or patients hospitalized in that

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<sup>8</sup> Heylighen

<sup>9</sup> Jeongwoo Lee, “문형표 장관 공식 사과...의원들 ‘사퇴하라’ [Minister of Health and Welfare Moon Hyungpyeo Publicly Apologizes...Congressmen ‘Resign’],” *The Hankyoreh* (Seoul, South Korea), Jun. 23, 2015. <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/assembly/697200.html>

facility will face unnecessary stigmas.”<sup>10</sup> However, such concealment of the information had opposite effects by enabling unconfirmed information to spread. Utilizing Social Network Services, groundless rumors of the list of the medical facilities spread. The rumormonger was charged for defamation and obstruction of justice<sup>11</sup>, but the rumors and citizen’s fear had already spread like wildfire. During the summer of 2015, I worked as an interpreter in Seoul St. Mary’s Hospital, located near an express bus terminal that had great floating population. I worked as an interpreter in the International Healthcare Center where foreign patients who don’t speak Korean would visit for additional support services. Even at such a massive hospital, I never saw it so vacated at the time of the outbreak. People avoided hospitals, fearing that they would contract the contagious, exotic disease while hospitalized and looked at me in fear when I told them that I worked in a hospital. One of the hospitals that had definite diagnosis had nearly 62.5% for outpatients, and for hospitalization, faced a 50.5% decrease.<sup>12</sup> The number of visiting patients dropped daily, and when one of the receptionists at the International Health Center received a call that one of the patients who displayed MERS symptoms was planning to visit, she was very insistent in explaining that we did not have a quarantine system established. When the patient visited the hospital anyway, every employee quickly distributed masks and made sure that the patients were treated separately. When any patient showed even remote symptoms of MERS and

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<sup>10</sup> Jungjun, Ahn, “메르스 발생 병원, 공개 안하겠다는 정부..국민들은 반발 [Government Won’t Reveal the Hospital with MERS Outbreak..Public Objects],” *Money Today Co., Ltd* (Seoul, South Korea), Jun. 02, 2015. <https://news.v.daum.net/v/20150602165112243>

<sup>11</sup> Aeri Kwon, “엉뚱한 병원 명단...메르스 괴담 유포자 첫 검거 [Incorrect List of Hospitals...First Arrest of MERS Scaremonger],” *SBS News* (Seoul, South Korea), Jun. 04, 2015. <https://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=102&oid=055&aid=0000319295>

<sup>12</sup> Kiwon Kim, “메르스 피해병원, ‘그간 하루 1억2천씩 28억원 손실’ [MERS Victim Hospital, ‘Lost 120 Million Daily, 2.8 Billion In Total Lost’],” *Doctorstimes* (Seoul, South Korea), Jun. 22, 2015. <http://www.doctorstimes.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=167052>.

sought treatment, or even upon hearing news that someone possibly had MERS, everyone vacated the scene. Compared to the American response to Ebola, where the Center of Disease Control disclosed that the “detailed national should be available to every front line health care worker about how to address a patient who may have Ebola ... so that we can ensure that the available information is up to date and useful,”<sup>13</sup> this contrasts with the Korean governmental response. While the American government ensured that thousands of healthcare workers were able to access information, the Korean government did not because of the potential discomfort and economic loss. Prioritizing economic loss over a contagious disease diminishes the public’s fear, giving the impression that the government was nonchalant to the growing patient and death count of MERS. The Korean government failed to establish the public’s trust early on by not disclosing the information, causing this situation to spiral out of control.

Some may argue that the 2015 MERS outbreak was objectively insignificant, due to the comparatively low death count, however, it provided a pivotal moment that allowed the public to wonder if their government was doing their job. The inadequate governmental response to MERS heightened the tension between the government and citizens. A congressman blamed the Samsung Medical Center for being unable to contain the disease because, out of 122 patients as of June 11 of 2015, 55 of them were from Samsung. However, the Samsung Medical Center refuted this by stating that “it is not our hospital that was penetrated, but the government that was

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<sup>13</sup> Tom Frieden, interview by Barbara Reynolds, *CDC Telebriefing: CDC update on first Ebola case diagnosed in the United States, 10-08-2014*, CDC Newsroom, 10. 08, 2014. <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2014/t1008-ebola-confirmed-case.html>

penetrated and compromised by the disease.”<sup>14</sup> While this may seem like a groundless accusation against the government — blaming all disasters to be the government’s fault — the data provided by the congressman was irrelevant, because Samsung Medical Center was significantly bigger, compared to other medical facilities and therefore would have hosted more visiting patients, furthering the risk of contraction. To the public’s fury and panic, a conservative congressman pointed out that “even though the government has done some wrong, MERS is merely ‘Middle Eastern camel flu’ but citizens are throwing tantrums”, and that “no one has died in our region but they are still fussing over it.”<sup>15</sup> Another congressman from the Liberty Korea Party said that “Korean citizens are easily frightened” and that “the word ‘MERS’ is conjuring fear, and experts are suggesting to change this word in our language that refers to it as ‘new variant flu’, and provides a plan so that the citizens worry less.”<sup>16</sup> It is true that the flu has killed more people than MERS, but such responses did not diminish the citizens’ fear. Even though the foreign name and rumors may have conjured irrational fear, citizens did not react well with the condescending politicians’ responses. The heightened governmental and public conflict gave the citizens an opportunity to think about what the public desired from a successful government.

Representatives stated that “if the government’s reason for the initial response failure and

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<sup>14</sup> Seunghyun Choi, and Duckho Sohn, “메르스 확산 삼성서울병원 책임론 공방... 병원측은 ‘우리가 아니라 국가가 뚫린 것’ [Samsung Medical Center Debate Responsibility for MERS Outbreak... Samsung Says ‘It’s Not Us but the Nation that was Penetrated’],” *Chosun.com* (Seoul, South Korea), Jun. 11, 2015. [http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2015/06/11/2015061102907.html?related\\_all](http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2015/06/11/2015061102907.html?related_all)

<sup>15</sup> Hwanbo Jung, “김문수도 ‘막말’ “낙타 독감을 핵무기보다 무서워해 ... 대한민국 웃겨” [Kim Moon-soo’s ‘Blunt Remark’ “Scared Of Camel Flu More Than Nuclear Weapons... Korea Is Funny”],” *Kyunghyang Shinmun* (Seoul, South Korea), Jun. 14, 2015. [http://news.khan.co.kr/kh\\_news/khan\\_art\\_view.html?artid=201506142151035&code=910402](http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=201506142151035&code=910402)

<sup>16</sup> Wan Heo, “새누리당 이철우, ‘메르스는 공포스러우니 이름을 바꾸자’ [Lee Chul-wo From Liberty Korea Party, ‘MERS Produces Fear So Change the Name’],” *Huffington Post Korea* (Seoul, South Korea), Jun. 09, 2015. [https://www.huffingtonpost.kr/entry/story\\_kr\\_7540696](https://www.huffingtonpost.kr/entry/story_kr_7540696)

concealing the information is due to the national image and economic effects, that is unacceptable”, and that the government is “beyond inadequate and doesn’t have a philosophy.”<sup>17</sup> For a previous national disaster of the Sinking of MV Sewol of 2014, the government did not respond adequately, resulting in the death count being 304. For MERS, even though they could have prevented the disease more effectively and could have been more transparent, the government did not disclose information which caused the public to lose faith, failing to protect the citizens throughout these national disasters. MERS may have not contributed directly to the presidential impeachment of 2017, but MERS still allowed the citizens to look back and look closely at what they wanted from the government.

Years after the 2015 outbreak, MERS now takes up a minor portion of people’s memory. Summer of 2015, MERS was a national threat to Korea, stopping all public services to shut down and scaring people away from hospitals. However, years after Korea had no additional MERS patients, now it seems like it is left behind to be forgotten. Such dismissal can take place because the disease itself has a comparatively small fatality rate, but back in 2015, it posed a significant threat. The inadequate response and the radical spread of the disease promoted the growth of the intensity of such a fearful event. The government’s secretive attitude on hiding MERS information allowed groundless rumors to spread, pushing the public to find and believe the information they could find on their own which supported even the irrational fears. Citizens spiraled out of fear and the government’s apathetic response exacerbated the situation, feeling that the government cannot and does not protect its citizens in times of disaster. Even though

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<sup>17</sup> Junho Ahn, “안철수, 메르스 대응 정부 4대 실책 지적, 문형표 복지장관 사퇴 촉구 [Ahn Cheol-so, Criticizes 4 Main Mistakes On MERS Governmental Response, Insists Minister Of Health And Welfare Should Resign],” *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul, South Korea), Jun. 23, 2015. [https://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2015/06/23/2015062301514.html](https://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2015/06/23/2015062301514.html)

now it comparatively seems like a minor event in history, MERS nonetheless served as a wake-up call for the Korean public.

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