**The Fear Equation**

By Michael Specter

In early March of 2003, when SARS swept into Hong Kong from Southern China, the streets of one of the world’s most densely populated areas were practically deserted. Venders sold face masks and hand sanitizer to anyone brave, or foolish, enough to leave home. The fear of a new highly contagious disease is understandable, and, with no effective treatment or vaccine for SARS, it was difficult to know what to do. The World Health Organization recommended that officials in the countries most affected warn people with a fever to stay off international flights.

Last week, the Obama Administration announced that, at five major U.S. airports, passengers arriving from Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone will be checked for fever. That measure isn’t likely to be any more effective at detecting the Ebola virus than it was at finding SARS. Thomas Eric Duncan, the first person to receive a diagnosis of Ebola in the United States, died last Wednesday, in Dallas.

On Wednesday, Senator Charles E. Schumer, of New York, said, “Taking temperatures and learning more about passengers coming here from West Africa will provide another necessary line of defense against this epidemic. When it comes to Ebola, you can’t be too careful. As we saw in Dallas, all it takes is one case to discombobulate an entire city.”