

CHAPTER SIX Mr. Index and the Marriott Outbreak “We assume it was introduced by one person.”

On February 26, 2020, Biogen conducted its annual leadership retreat at the Marriott Long Wharf hotel in Boston, inviting 175 employees from around the world. This event commenced with breakfasts and awards ceremonies, fostering close interactions among attendees who hadn't met for some time. However, unbeknownst to them, they were amidst a public health crisis concerning a novel virus, SARS-CoV-2, which had just started spreading globally. In the weeks following the event, numerous attendees began developing flu-like symptoms, leading to an alarming outbreak.

Initially, Biogen's leadership was optimistic about the situation, unaware of the impending chaos. The weekend after the conference, the first executive presented at Massachusetts General Hospital with concerning symptoms, followed closely by many others. A flurry of urgent emails ensued, advising all attendees to seek medical attention. As they sought to contain the outbreak, it became clear the situation had escalated; those infected had traveled from Boston to various locations, potentially spreading the virus further. The consequences of this event revealed itself as a public health disaster, with health officials desperately trying to track and control the spread of infection.

In retrospect, the Marriott meeting represents a pivotal moment introducing difficult questions about epidemic spread and the impact of individual behavior on community health. Notably, when the Boston region's first COVID case appeared on January 31, 2020, it involved a student returning from Wuhan but resulted in no further spreading. This contrasted sharply with the Biogen conference, where its attendees became the epicenter for an extensive outbreak traced back to a unique strain of the virus, identified through genetic signatures.

Scientific investigations revealed that this single meet-up had produced an alarming estimate of over 300,000 infections in total. The main culprit referred to as “Mr. Index,” likely introduced the virus unknowingly. The chapter underscores the unseen mechanisms by which diseases can propagate and the nuanced roles individuals play in outbreaks. It presents an unsettling truth about how social factors and individual characteristics influence epidemic dynamics. The knowledge gained could significantly impact future public health responses and interventions against airborne infectious diseases .