

Cuba responds to Ebola

The first known case of Ebola virus disease appeared in the West African country of Guinea in December 2013. By September of 2014, over 1900 deaths from Ebola had been reported in the region. The United Nations (UN) and World Health Organization (WHO) issued a call for medical collaboration in response to the medical and social disaster caused by the epidemic. One of the nations to answer that call was the small country of Cuba, which responded immediately to the call by offering the assistance of specialized medical personnel.

Medical cooperation with other countries has been part of Cuba's Ministry of Public Health since its very beginning. The first service of this kind took place related to a natural disaster: a massive earthquake in Chile in 1960, to which Cuban medical teams responded immediately. Between 1963 and 1999, over 40,000 health workers participated in Cuban medical mission collaborative programs in 83 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

In response to the Ebola epidemic, the Cuban health authorities offered a group of doctors the chance to volunteer for the risky work of treatment of the disease in West Africa. Those who accepted had the first part of their training at Cuba's national tropical medicine training center. They learned how to manage the care of Ebola patients, the use of special protective suits to be worn during contact with the sick, how to work in field hospitals, and detailed updates on clinical aspects of the condition. A team of professionals who had worked in Sierra Leone directly with Ebola patients also joined the Cuban teachers in training. These experts provided information about the disease, living conditions at the site, proper attire for the volunteers, and the types of personal protections that would be needed. Hearing their experiences, their daily routines, and the problems they face at work settings was an important part of the training. Medical staff then received a second intensive training in Liberia with patients suffering from Ebola. All the Cuban personnel were certified by WHO to serve on the Ebola Treatment Unit.

As of late October 2014, WHO reported that Ebola virus disease had caused nearly 5000 deaths and infected 13,000 patients. Between October 2014 and April 2015, a total of 256 Cuban health professionals had been placed in West Africa, including 53 in Liberia, 165 in Sierra Leone and 38 in Guinea-Conakry. This was the largest single group of specialized collaborators to work in the affected region. Many more were needed, but except for Cuba's, the international response was low and slow.

In the three countries most affected by the disease, Cuban medical personnel not only played a major role in treating Ebola, but also in health promotion and education for individual patients and communities. In the three countries, they attended 1728 patients and saved an estimated 356 people from death due to the disease.

Among the Cuban volunteers, two died during their tour of duty, both from malaria. Malaria claims many lives every day in Africa, where it is endemic, although it was eradicated in Cuba in 1967.

Only one Cuban volunteer became infected with Ebola, a 43-year old specialist in internal medicine, who worked with patients in Sierra Leone. He was treated in Switzerland, returned to Cuba for a recovery period, and subsequently returned to Sierra Leone to continue his work in Ebola treatment.

The remarkable response of the Cuban medical teams to the Ebola epidemic in West Africa is only one example of the Cuban efforts to strengthening health care provision in areas of need throughout the world. The Cuban commitment to international medical collaboration is a model that could be more widely applied.

Enrique Beldarraín Chaple, Mary Anne Mercer
University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA

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Chaple EB, Mercer MA

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