

Ebola outbreak showing swift spread but low mortality rate

The Frost & Sullivan healthcare program manager, Dr Etienne van Wyk, in commenting about the current outbreak of Ebola, states that the current strain of the virus is the Zaire strain, which is the most dangerous and usually associated with 90% mortality rate. However, this outbreak only has a mortality rate of less than 60% percent. Reports are that 1600 have been infected and only 900 have died.



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"While Ebola is highly virulent disease, it is not particularly contagious. Ebola is spread through physical contact with bodily fluids including sweat and saliva; however, the current understanding of the virus is that it is not airborne.

"Due to the rapid spread and number of people infected in this outbreak, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) has rising concerns that it may in fact be airborne, but this means of spreading has not been confirmed. The reason for the rapid spread is most likely rather due to poor health infrastructure and low levels of education rather than that of being spread by air.

"The challenges are no different to any other outbreak. The most important is to isolate patients and then treatment is most symptomatic. Patients should be re-hydrated, given blood, pain medication and kept comfortable but no specific approved antivirals are available. There is an experimental drug called ZMapp, which has been developed by a private biotech company in the US called Mapp Biopharmaceuticals. The two US aid workers who contracted Ebola in Liberia were given this drug and this has helped to improve their condition.

"Vaccination can work by targeting communities around the outbreak to try and prevent further spread. However, vaccines naturally take a while before the body's immune system has built up resistance, so this does little for the spread in the short term. The unpredictable nature of the outbreaks also means that even when a vaccination is available, there is very little one can do, short of vaccinating everyone in Africa, to prevent further outbreaks.

"The likelihood of the disease spreading in the US and UK is very always there but a widespread outbreak in these countries is highly unlikely. Most private and public hospitals, especially in developed countries like South Africa, should have appropriate response plans in place to react to any potential sign of patients entering their facilities with symptoms associated with Ebola," he concludes.

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