

WHO approves experimental Ebola drugs (Update 2)

August 12 2014, by Nina Larson With Zoom Dosso In Monrovia

The World Health Organization authorised Tuesday the use of experimental drugs to fight Ebola as the death toll topped 1,000 and a Spanish priest became the first European to succumb to the latest outbreak.

The declaration by the UN's health agency came after a US company that makes an experimental serum called ZMapp said it had sent all its available supplies to hard-hit west Africa.

"In the special circumstances of this Ebola outbreak it is ethical to offer unregistered interventions as potential treatments or prevention," WHO assistant director general Marie-Paule Kieny told reporters in Geneva, following a meeting of medical experts on the issue.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon announced plans to step up the global response to the outbreak, while urging governments to "avoid panic and fear" over an easily-preventable disease.

The epidemic, described as the worst since Ebola was first discovered four decades ago, has killed 1,013 people since early this year, the WHO said.

Cases have been limited to Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, which account for the bulk of victims, and Nigeria, where two people have died.

Terror has gripped the impoverished west African countries ravaged by the disease, with harrowing tales emerging of people being shunned by their villages as the virus fells those around them.

When AFP visited the Liberian village of Ballajah, some 150 kilometres (90 miles) from the capital Monrovia, 12-year-old Fatu Sherrif had been locked away with her mother's body without food and water for a week.

Her cries went unanswered as panicked residents fled the village when both her parents fell sick.

Fatu later died and her brother Barnie, 15, despite testing negative for Ebola, was left alone and hungry in an abandoned house.

"Nobody wants to come near me and they know—people told them that I don't have Ebola," he told AFP.

Promising vaccines

Elderly Spanish priest Miguel Pajares, who became infected while helping patients in Liberia, died in a Madrid hospital Tuesday, five days after being evacuated.

He had been treated with ZMapp, which failed to save him but has shown positive effects on two US aid workers also infected in Liberia.

There is currently no available cure or vaccine for Ebola, which the WHO has declared a global public health emergency, and the use of experimental drugs has stoked a fierce ethical debate.

Despite promising results for the ZMapp treatment, made by private US company Mapp Biopharmaceutical, it had only been tested previously on monkeys.

ZMapp is also in very short supply but the company said it had sent all available doses to west Africa free of charge after an outcry over its use on foreign aid workers.

"Any decision to use ZMapp must be made by the patients' medical team," it said, without revealing which nation received the doses, or how many were sent.

Kieny said WHO had been told three doses were sent to Liberia.

Sierra Leone's health ministry spokesman Sidi Yahya Tunis told AFP the country had officially requested a shipment of the serum.

While the ZMapp stock has been exhausted for now, Kieny stressed there were other "potential therapies and vaccines ... considered very serious alternatives."

'Right a wrong of history'

Kieny said two possible vaccines were moving rapidly towards clinical trials.

She described the lack of vaccines and treatments for Ebola as "a market failure," pointing out that plenty of drugs had been developed "to a point", but companies had not footed the bill for the more expensive clinical trial process since the virus was "typically a disease of poor people in poor countries where there is no market."

"This is an opportunity to right a wrong of history," she said.

The use of unauthorised drugs that had proven safe and effective in monkeys could be a "potent asset" in the fight against Ebola, she said.

Meanwhile Ban appointed British physician David Nabarro to be the UN coordinator for Ebola.

"In the days ahead, the UN system will further strengthen the way we are dealing with the outbreak," the UN secretary-general said.

He cited the urgent need to address the shortage of doctors, nurses and equipment, including protective clothing and isolation tents in the affected countries.

"We need all hands on deck," said Ban. "Ebola has been successfully brought under control elsewhere and we can do it here too."

Price hikes and food shortages

Drastic containment measures have caused transport chaos, price hikes and food shortages, and are stoking fears that people could die of hunger.

Numerous countries around the globe have imposed emergency measures, including flight bans and improved health screenings.

Guinea-Bissau was the latest west African nation to close its borders with an affected country—its neighbour Guinea. It has also taken a raft of radical measures such as banning group gatherings at weddings and funerals.

Sierra Leone President Ernest Bai Koroma meanwhile expressed his "utter dismay" at the "slow pace" of the international community in responding to the outbreak.

Eight Chinese medical workers who treated patients with Ebola have been placed in quarantine in Sierra Leone, but China's state news agency

Xinhua said they showed no signs of Ebola symptoms as yet, citing the embassy in Freetown.

In addition, 24 nurses have been quarantined, health officials said, while a physician had contracted Ebola but was responding well to treatment.

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