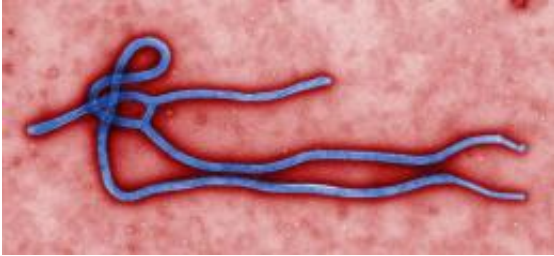


Should the world be scared of Ebola?

August 8 2014, by Elisabeth Zingg



Electron micrograph of an Ebola virus virion. Credit: CDC/Cynthia Goldsmith

After AIDS, SARS, avian flu and the coronavirus, now Ebola is in the headlines and sparking panic. AFP asks health historian Patrick Zylberman if the world should fear a pandemic.

— To what extent should we worry about the current Ebola outbreak?

Zylberman: There is a primeval fear in all of us of a pandemic that kills off humanity but we should be wary of comparing Ebola to the ancient plagues of history, when all our ancestors had to fight them was prayers.

During the Spanish flu outbreak of 1918-1919 which killed 50 million people worldwide, there were no antibiotics, we didn't understand the virus and we had no emergency and resuscitation services.

Today, Western countries have efficient [health](#) systems that allow us to contain—or even prevent—the spread of viruses, but this is not the case

in countries affected by Ebola.

Basically, the current crisis is at about the same level as the SARS outbreak but the difference is that Africa is far less developed politically and in terms of health policy than China in 2003.

— We seem to have one health crisis after another. Are there more viruses than before and what can we do to reassure people?

Zylberman: Since the mid-20th century, we have been finding more and more viruses because there are more viruses out there but also because we're better at detecting them.

There has been an increase in epidemics in southern countries. Just for Ebola, there have been some 20 outbreaks in Africa since 1976 but only in villages, not in towns and cities as is currently the case.

It is important to make the local population aware of the risks and how they can become contaminated and not just distribute leaflets when the local population cannot read.

But concerns are growing too in other countries that the epidemic could be imported. This is a delicate problem for health authorities because they have to make people aware of the risks in the proper fashion without appearing too concerned, which would itself sow more worry among the people.

— Why is the current outbreak so serious?

Zylberman: Although the Ebola virus does not spread as easily as flu, the current epidemic is spreading quickly in Africa. The death rate is very high, around 50 to 90 percent, if there's no specific treatment, while it was only around 2.5 percent for Spanish flu.

The populations affected don't know how the virus spreads and so are still carrying out their funeral rites, kissing and embracing the corpses, as our ancestors did during the [cholera epidemic](#) that raged through Europe in the 19th century.

In addition, they have no faith in the health officials in their own [countries](#) so they chase medical staff away with stones or they believe staff are going to kidnap and kill them. Trust is a very important element.

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