

Families wait in agony for word on Ebola patients

September 30 2014, by Krista Larson



In this picture taken Sunday, Sept. 28, 2014, Finda Saah, 28, holds six-week-old Prosper Junior, as 5 year old Alice and 13-year old son Augustin look on, at their St Paul Bridge home in Monrovia, Liberia. Finda lost her husband to the deadly Ebola virus and gave birth three days later. Ebola has killed more than 1800 people in Liberia this year. As the death toll from Ebola soars, crowded clinics are turning over beds as quickly as patients are dying. This leaves social workers and psychologists struggling to keep pace and notify families, who must wait outside for fear of contagion. Also, under a government decree, all Ebola victims must be cremated, leaving families in unbearable pain with no chance for goodbye, no body to bury. (AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

First the ring tone echoed outside the barbed-wire-topped walls of the Ebola clinic. Then came the wails of grief, as news spread that 31-year-old Rose Johnson was dead just days after she was brought here unconscious by relatives.

Soon her mother's sorrow became so unbearable, her body so limp and heavy, that even her two other daughters could no longer help her stand.

There had been no official confirmation of Rose's death from hospital officials, no time for someone to explain her final moments, just word from a family acquaintance inside who said her bed had been cleared that morning to make way for a new patient.

Her grieving husband stood in a daze outside the hospital, scratching air time cards so he could use his mobile phone to notify other family members.

"I've been here every day, every day, every day," says David Johnson, 31, now left with the couple's 18-month-old daughter Divine. "Up till now there has been no information. How can I believe she is dead?"

As the death toll from Ebola soars, crowded clinics are turning over beds as quickly as patients are dying. This leaves social workers and psychologists struggling to keep pace and notify families, who must wait outside for fear of contagion. Also, under a government decree, all Ebola victims must be cremated, leaving families in unbearable pain with no chance for goodbye, no body to bury.

"People are standing around for weeks. Nobody is coming to them. There should be a system in place for disseminating information but there is nothing," says Kanyeian Molton Farley, a 39-year-old community leader in one of Monrovia's hardest-hit neighborhoods.

At least 1,830 people are believed to have died from the disease here in Liberia, and many fear the actual toll is far higher and rising fast. A recent update from the World Health Organization showed that more than half the cases in Liberia happened in the preceding 21 days.

Doctors Without Borders in Monrovia has three phone lines to answer calls from worried families. The group asks relatives to come in person for updates on their loved ones inside the 160-bed facility, but sometimes they get news from friends or family inside instead, says Athena Viscusi, a clinical social worker.

"We encourage them to come and meet with a counselor," says Viscusi. She notes that Doctors Without Borders hopes eventually to photograph the dead before cremation to help with identification.



In this picture taken Sunday, Sept. 28, 2014, Julius Prout, 32, poses for a photograph in front of the St Paul Bridge community clinic where he works in Monrovia, Liberia. Falling victim to the Ebola virus after treating more than a

dozen others infected, following a traditional funeral, Prout was wrongly declared dead, prompting family members to hold two wakes in his memory. A registered nurse, Prout stunned relative when he called them after recovering from the deadly disease. Prout is now back in his neighborhood, immune from Ebola and eager to help other victims. As the death toll from Ebola soars, crowded clinics are turning over beds as quickly as patients are dying. This leaves social workers and psychologists struggling to keep pace and notify families, who must wait outside for fear of contagion. Also, under a government decree, all Ebola victims must be cremated, leaving families in unbearable pain with no chance for goodbye, no body to bury. (AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

Dozens of [family members](#) show up each day at the gates of the city's Ebola clinics, anxiously clutching cell phones and desperate for any update on their loved ones inside. They pace back and forth, leaving only to buy more phone credit. All the while, they keep a safe distance from those stricken with Ebola who huddle by the gates in hopes of gaining a coveted bed inside and a chance at life.

Linda Barlea, 32, is desperate to know what has become of her boyfriend of 13 years. One by one his family has been decimated by Ebola: First his brother, then his mother, then a sister, then another brother. Only the 7-year-old niece Miamu has survived, and then was chased from Barlea's home by fearful neighbors.

Barlea's mother called the clinic's official hotline for patient information and was told his name appeared on the list of the dead. Barlea says she needs to hear it for herself. But every time she calls now, she gets a busy signal. So she has shown up here, demanding answers before she will leave.

The lack of official confirmation has led to disastrous misinformation in some cases: Julius Prout's family held two wakes for him after being told

by a security guard at the clinic that he was dead. Family members gathered first for several days at his parents' home, then at his uncle's.

Instead, health workers had merely moved him to another section of the hospital and burned his cell phone along with his belongings for fear of contamination.

When the 32-year-old nurse regained his strength almost a week later, the first thing he saw was a Bible given to him by a nurse. He says it is no coincidence that he opened it randomly to John 11, when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

Prout then borrowed a phone to call the family. All he could hear was the deafening sound of loved ones yelling and cheering in the background.

"We rejoiced and were so grateful that he was alive," says his uncle, Alexander Howard, 57.



In this picture taken Sunday, Sept. 28, 2014, Kumba "survivor" Fayiah, 11, sits with relatives in her St Paul Bridge home in Monrovia, Liberia. Fayiah, who lost both parents and her sister, recovered from the Ebola virus and is now living with her extended family. As the death toll from Ebola soars, crowded clinics are turning over beds as quickly as patients are dying. This leaves social workers and psychologists struggling to keep pace and notify families, who must wait outside for fear of contagion. Also, under a government decree, all Ebola victims must be cremated, leaving families in unbearable pain with no chance for goodbye, no body to bury. (AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

Rumors only intensify the hellish wait for those like Alieu Kenneh, who took his 24-year-old pregnant wife to four different hospitals before they finally found a place for her at Island Clinic, the capital's latest Ebola treatment center.

Several days after Mandou was admitted, word spread that a pregnant woman inside had died. Surely, though, there was more than one. Could it be her?

The last image he has of her, replaying in his mind, is as they slammed the ambulance door shut, telling him there wasn't enough room for him to join her on the ride. Then a disinfection team sprayed the bewildered man left watching it drive away.

Kenneh held vigil outside her clinic for seven days.. One week after she was admitted, the phone finally rang. The doctor said she had died five days earlier after going into labor. The baby had not made it.

Kenneh, who met his wife when the two were teenagers living in a refugee camp in neighboring Guinea, now can't bear to go back to the

apartment they shared. Her photos and clothes are everywhere, along with the blankets they had bought for the baby.

On top of it, Monday was her birthday. She should have turned 25, he says in tears. She was so excited to become a mother, and didn't know the sex of the child she was carrying. A nurse told her husband it was a boy.

"We give them to God and we cannot say anything more than that," he says.

The tiny baby's body was cremated before Kenneh even knew his son had been born.

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