

# Health experts look to untested drugs to fight Ebola (Update)

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Health experts honed in Friday on a handful of unproven drugs they hope might turn the lethal tide of Ebola, as key figures urged that funds go for frontline crisis care in some of the world's poorest states.

On the second and last day of World Health Organization-hosted talks in Geneva, some 200 health experts discussed fast-tracking two potential vaccines and eight possible therapies, including the drug ZMapp that has been used on a handful of frontline workers.

With no fully tested treatments for Ebola, the WHO has endorsed rushing out potential cures—a call echoed by African doctors battling the epidemic that has taken some 1,900 lives.

"Everybody keeps asking why isn't this medication made available to our people out there?" Samuel Kargbo, from Sierra Leone's ministry of health, told AFP on the sidelines of the closed-door conference.

The WHO said "extraordinary measures" were in place to accelerate the pace of clinical trials—but admitted even that would likely not allow "widespread use before the end of 2014".

Abdulsalami Nasidi, project director at the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, nevertheless told AFP the Geneva discussion "gives a lot of hope to the African people affected and those who are in panic".

ZMapp has been given to about 10 infected health workers, including

Americans and Europeans, of whom three have recovered.

Current stocks are exhausted, but the WHO said a few hundred doses could potentially be ready by the end of the year.

But beyond experimental drugs, the key to controlling the Ebola outbreak, which began in Guinea and has spread to Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Senegal, is manpower and medical basics, experts say.

"What is needed? It is health workers, ... treatment centres, ... supplies," WHO spokesman Tarik Jasarevic told reporters Friday.

## **'Fragile health systems'**

On Friday the European Union released 140 million euros in aid to combat the disease, a day after the United States offered an additional \$75 million to buy beds and bolster treatment centres.

The UN's children agency also announced Friday it had used funds from the World Bank to airlift 48 tonnes of medicine and medical supplies, including latex gloves and other protective equipment, intravenous fluids and antibiotics to treat Ebola patients in Sierra Leone.

The crisis has stirred a fierce debate about how the world should have responded after first reports trickled out from some of the world's poorest countries with dilapidated medical infrastructure.

"Weak health systems mean disaster, mean death," Nasidi said.

In a commentary in *The Lancet* medical journal published Friday, Georgetown University's Lawrence Gostin also blamed "human resource shortages and fragile health systems" for the extent of the outbreak.

"How could this Ebola outbreak have been averted and what could states and the international community do to prevent the next epidemic?" asked Gostin.

"The answer is not untested drugs, mass quarantines, or even humanitarian relief," he wrote, but "to fix these inherent structural deficiencies."

## **Aid workers 'exhausted'**

Until then, the haemorrhagic fever, which spreads via body fluids, appears to be winning the battle.

"The situation continues to get worse, and there is no end in sight," said Elhadj As Sy, head of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

As Say said 1,700 Red Cross volunteers were "literally exhausted" from the hands-on work of treating the infected, retrieving corpses of victims from far-flung sites and fighting rumours on the ground about Ebola.

Doctors Without Borders (Medecins Sans Frontieres, MSF) earlier this week said the world was "losing the battle" to contain the ruthless virus.

Asked for the WHO's reaction to that dire assessment, spokesman Jasarevic acknowledged Friday that "we're trailing the illness now, when what we need to do is to be in front of it."

The WHO, in an official toll on Thursday, counted 1,841 deaths, out of a total of 3,685 cases in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Another seven people died in Nigeria out of 22 cases, while one case has been confirmed in Senegal, it said.

But Jasarevic told AFP the official death toll was likely a gross underestimate due to under-reporting, saying it "is estimated that there are two to four times as many people infected with Ebola as reported".

At least 30 more people have died in a separate outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

American doctor Rick Sacra, who was infected while working in hardest-hit Liberia, arrived in the United States for treatment on Friday.

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