

US hunts contacts of seriously ill Ebola patient

October 2 2014

US health officials scoured the Dallas area Wednesday for people—including schoolchildren—who came in contact with a Liberian man who was diagnosed with Ebola, as it emerged a hospital mix-up saw him initially turned away.

More people may have been exposed to the contagious man after he first sought treatment on September 25 because an apparent miscommunication among staff resulted in his release back into the community for several days, Texas hospital officials admitted.

Ebola is spread through close contact with the bodily fluids of an infected person, and can only be transmitted when a patient is showing symptoms like fever, aches, bleeding, vomiting or diarrhea.

The man—the first person to be diagnosed with Ebola on US soil—flew from Liberia, the hardest-hit nation in West Africa's deadly Ebola outbreak, and arrived in Texas on September 20 to visit family. He fell ill on September 24.

He went to the hospital the next day but was sent home because the medical team "felt clinically it was a low-grade common viral disease," said Mark Lester, executive vice president of Texas Health Resources.

"He volunteered that he had traveled from Africa in response to the nurse operating the checklist and asking that question," Lester added.

"Regretfully, that information was not fully communicated throughout the full team."

A hospital statement issued later in the day said his initial symptoms on September 25 were "low-grade fever and abdominal pain," and that "his condition did not warrant admission."

The patient is currently in serious but stable condition.

He came in contact with schoolchildren before he returned via ambulance to the Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital Dallas on September 28, and was placed in strict isolation.

"I know that parents are being extremely concerned about that development," Texas Governor Rick Perry said.

"These children have been identified and they are being monitored and the disease cannot be transmitted before having any symptoms."

The Emmett J. Conrad High School in Dallas wrote to tell parents that a student there may have had contact with the unnamed Ebola patient, but stressed the child was not showing any symptoms.

"There is nothing to suggest that the disease was spread to others," the school said.

Symptoms of infection

The incubation period for Ebola is between two and 21 days. Patients are not contagious until they start to have symptoms. Ebola can lead to massive bleeding and fatal organ failure.

A 10-member team of experts from the US Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention has landed in Texas to assist the investigation.

While health experts say the public should not panic—since Ebola is spread not through the air but only through close contact with bodily fluids—medical personnel are on the lookout for more cases of Ebola on US soil.

Zachary Thompson, the director of Dallas County Health and Human Services, told local media that "there may be another case that is a close associate with this particular patient."

Three crew members who worked in the ambulance that transported the patient have tested negative, but they will be monitored for 21 days, the City Of Dallas said on Twitter.

Anthony Fauci, the head of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Disease, said the man should have been identified as a suspected Ebola case the first time he sought care.

"If the person said, 'Well, I just came back from Liberia,' that would have been an enormous red flag for anybody, given the publicity that we have," Fauci told CNN.

The 10,000-strong Liberian community in the Dallas area is concerned about the arrival of Ebola on US soil but remains confident in the medical authorities, said Alben Tarty, a spokesman for the Liberian Community Association of Dallas Fort Worth.

Worldwide toll jumps

As US officials scrambled to track down people, the worldwide death toll from Ebola jumped higher, to 3,338 dead and 7,178 infected since the beginning of the year, the World Health Organization said.

Meanwhile, the United Nations announced its first suspected victim of Ebola, a Liberian man who worked for the UN mission in Liberia and died of a probable but unconfirmed infection last week.

In response to the fast-moving outbreak, the World Bank boosted its aid to the campaign by adding \$170 million toward expanding the health-care workforce and buying needed supplies for care and treatment.

The new aid took to \$400 million the amount the bank has put toward the fight against the spread of Ebola, which has swept quickly through Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone.

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