

# Ebola, Obamacare top U.S. health news for 2014

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VA hospitals scandal, enterovirus illnesses in kids, surge in e-cigarette use also made headlines this year.

(HealthDay)—It started as a deadly but little-known outbreak in West Africa, but the lethal and unchecked spread of the Ebola virus dominated U.S. headlines for much of 2014, making it one of the year's top health news stories.

According to the latest World Health Organization figures, nearly 20,000 reported cases of Ebola—including more than 7,700 deaths—have occurred since the outbreak began earlier this year in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. By September, the first of 11 cases treated in the United States began to worry Americans, and two cases acquired in the United States—nurses treating an Ebola-infected patient at a Dallas hospital—sparked fears the disease might spread in this country.

Under criticism for what some considered an uneven response to the

threat, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in December designated 35 specially equipped hospitals across the United States as Ebola treatment centers.

While the survival rate for patients treated in the United States has been much higher than in West Africa—nine out of 11 patients beat their illness here—the U.S. still faces the potential for more cases to come, experts say.

"As long as Ebola is spreading in West Africa, we must prepare for the possibility of additional cases in the United States," CDC Director Dr. Tom Frieden said earlier this month.

The other big health story of the year: the continued rollout of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), also known as Obamacare. By the end of the year, the Obama Administration said, 10 million Americans had gained [health care coverage](#), with nearly 2 million new enrollees signing up for coverage for 2015.

But there were some serious bumps along the way. Following withering criticism for the bungled launch of the HealthCare.gov website in 2013, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius resigned her post in April.

Key judicial battles over Obamacare were won and lost, as well. In June, the U.S. Supreme Court, citing religious objections, ruled that family-owned companies could opt out of a provision of the ACA that would have required them to offer insurance coverage for contraception.

And in July, two federal appeals courts came to opposite rulings on the use of financial subsidies for people who bought health insurance through the federal HealthCare.gov exchange—signaling a possible future showdown on the issue before the Supreme Court. With

Republicans winning control of Congress in November, more battles over Obamacare may be yet to come.

Other top health news stories for 2014, as compiled by the editors at *HealthDay*, included:

- **Scandal Rocks VA Hospital System.** Earlier this year, allegations by whistle-blowers inside the Veterans Administration prompted an FBI investigation into long waiting times for patients at VA hospitals, and claims that hospital executives had falsified records to cover up the problem. The scandal triggered the resignation of VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, with one internal audit revealing that more than 64,000 newly enrolled veterans who had sought appointments for care never received one.
- **Potentially Deadly Virus Hits Kids.** Enteroviruses include the common cold, but in 2014 a particular strain called Enterovirus D68 was linked to hundreds of U.S. cases of serious pediatric illness, some involving paralysis. At least one death—a 4-year-old boy in New Jersey—was confirmed to have been caused by the virus, although the germ is thought to have played an indirect role in other pediatric deaths, the CDC said.
- **E-Cigarette Use Soars, Amid Debate.** Are e-cigarettes a welcome, less dangerous alternative to smoked tobacco, or merely a new "gateway" device to smoking? The argument got louder in 2014, with a U.S. National Institutes of Health survey finding that 10th graders are now more likely to have tried an e-cigarette (16 percent) than a traditional cigarette (7 percent). Leading medical groups—including the American Medical Association, the American Heart Association and the World Health Organization—all advocate more restrictions on "vaping" devices. However, one recent NIH-funded study concluded that the benefits of e-cigarettes may outweigh harms for people looking to quit smoking.

- **Infectious Disease Outbreaks Tied to Anti-Vaccine Movement.** A small minority of parents who shun vaccination for their kids may be unwittingly playing a role in the resurgence of once-rare childhood diseases, some health experts contend. In 2014, California suffered its worst outbreak of pertussis (whooping cough) in 70 years. CDC statistics show that U.S. measles cases have reached a 20-year high. And even the National Hockey League was laid low by an outbreak of mumps. While all these illnesses can be prevented by vaccines, even leaving a small percentage of children unvaccinated puts everyone at added risk, experts said.
- **Cancer Patient Brittany Maynard's Suicide Galvanizes Right-to-Die Movement.** Maynard, a 29-year-old cancer patient from California, moved to Oregon so she could take advantage of that state's "Death With Dignity Act." Her story went viral online and her planned death in early November reignited the debate over assisted suicide. In December, a *HealthDay/Harris Poll* found that 74 percent of Americans now support the right of terminally ill patients in great pain to end their lives.
- **FDA Mandates Calorie Counts on Many Menus.** The war on widening waistlines moved to the menus of America's larger chain restaurants in November, with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration mandating calorie counts next to most food and drink items. Even theater popcorn and ice cream parlor treats are subject to the new rules, the agency said.
- **New Drugs Offer Cure for Hepatitis C.** Until recently, infection with the hepatitis C virus often meant a slow but nearly inevitable destruction of the liver, and death from liver failure or cancer was common. But the advent of powerful, targeted drug cocktails with over a 90 percent cure rate may put an end to that for many. However, cost remains a barrier: newly approved hepatitis C drugs Harvoni and Sovaldi each cost more than \$1,000 per pill.

- **Medicare OKs CT Scans for Long-Term Smokers.** Lung cancer remains the leading cancer killer of Americans, in part because it is often detected too late. However, recent landmark studies suggest that CT scans of the lungs of long-term smokers might catch tumors early. So, in November the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services announced it would cover those services. Groups such as the American Cancer Society and American Lung Association applauded the move.

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