

Journalists find holes in program designed to respond to infectious disease outbreaks

July 8 2016, by Hilary Hurd Anyaso

Even as a perfect storm of conditions created the potential for a catastrophic global pandemic over the past decade, the U.S. government allowed gaping holes in an early-warning system designed to respond to infectious disease outbreaks, according to a new special report published by Northwestern University's Medill National Security Reporting Project in conjunction with VICE News.

The centerpiece of that system, known as the Global Disease Detection (GDD) program, involved building 18 regional health surveillance centers in disease hotspots around the world. But more than a decade later, the federal government has only built 10, none of them in vast swaths of Africa and South America where U.S. health officials have long warned that new and increasingly deadly infectious viruses could emerge, Medill students found.

U.S. officials now concede that if they had built a center in West Africa as some health officials had urged, the deadly Ebola outbreak of 2014 might have been stopped, or certainly contained, before more than 11,300 people died.

"It's a question I ask myself. If we had a GDD center there—if we had active surveillance—could we have picked up Ebola earlier? I think you'd had to have your head buried in the sand to say no," Joel Montgomery, a top Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) official, told Medill. "Of course, we would have picked it up earlier."

Those are some of the [findings of an investigation](#) by students from Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications. A team of seven graduate students spent three months reporting on global infectious disease, deploying throughout Washington, D.C., and to CDC headquarters in Atlanta.

They also reported on the re-emergence of polio from the urban sprawl of Karachi, Pakistan, and on how researchers are analyzing the bats of Tao Pun, Thailand, for clues as to where the next killer zoonotic virus will jump from animals to humans and spread around the world.

The project, titled "[The Perfect Storm](#)," is being published this week by VICE News, a U.S.-based media organization with a global reach across all digital platforms. It is also being published on a special Medill website created by the reporting team, complete with even more videos and multimedia/interactive components. The findings are based on interviews with dozens of experts, health and government officials and a Medill analysis of dozens of reports and studies.

"This project is accountability-driven, public service journalism of the highest order, and we're grateful to VICE News for being so supportive of our work and for publishing our findings to a worldwide audience," said Josh Meyer, project leader and director of education and outreach for the Medill National Security Journalism Initiative. "The students have performed a huge public service by shining a bright light on this important and timely topic."

The Medill initiative, as well as the student scholarships for the Washington-based project, are funded through a generous grant from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation.

The student team included data/graphics/interactive producer Jin Wu,

who designed the website, built the interactives and contributed reporting. The reporters, across all digital platforms, on the project were Dawnn Anderson, Adriana Cargill, Ezra Kaplan, Nicole McGee, Aditya Prakash and Lydia Sommerville Randall.

They were assisted by Meyer and four award-winning professional journalists who served as adjunct professors: Tyler Fisher of National Public Radio (and a recent Medill graduate); Erin Harper, recently of the Chicago Tribune; Steven Rich of The Washington Post; and independent photographer/videographer Allison Shelley.

"Emerging disease pandemics are a growing global threat," said VICE News managing editor Alberto Riva. "These important stories remind us that a worldwide public health crisis is always around the corner and that global health issues intersect with many social, economic and political factors."

Provided by Northwestern University

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