

Burial teams dramatically reduced Ebola cases during west Africa outbreak: study

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The Ebola virus, isolated in November 2014 from patient blood samples obtained in Mali. The virus was isolated on Vero cells in a BSL-4 suite at Rocky Mountain Laboratories. Credit: NIAID

Red Cross volunteers prevented a significant number of Ebola cases during the 2013-2016 epidemic in west Africa by using safe burial

techniques, according to a study released Thursday.

The outbreak that killed more than 11,300 people and sickened nearly 29,000—mainly in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone—could have been much worse, according to the study published in the *PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases* medical journal.

Using statistical modelling, the study indicated that the efforts of Red Cross volunteers to properly bury the highly contagious bodies potentially averted as many as 10,452 Ebola cases, decreasing the scale of the outbreak by more than a third.

Due to the very high death toll at the beginning of the outbreak, there were meanwhile gaps in the statistics the researchers managed to gather, and they acknowledged that the number of averted cases could be as low as 1,411.

Early in the outbreak, "funeral practices and unsafe burials were causing large amounts of cases," said Amanda McClelland, an emergency health advisor with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

With traditional burial rites in the hard-hit west African countries requiring the kissing, washing and touching of the dead body, funerals quickly became "super-spreading events" with up to 70 people infected during a single ceremony, she told reporters.

Ensuring safe burials quickly became a priority in the fight against the deadly virus, along with isolating and treating the sick.

'Dangerous task'

Because of suspicion in the communities of outsiders and their

intentions, the task of negotiating access and carrying out the burials fell especially to local volunteers.

In their bid to rein in the raging epidemic, the volunteers used the safe burial procedures for everyone who died in affected areas, regardless of their suspected cause of death.

In all, the Red Cross [volunteer](#) teams managed more than 47,000 safe burials, or more than half of all burials conducted during the [outbreak](#), the IFRC said.

Organisation chief Elhadj As Sy said that efforts to understand and respect local culture and customs, as well as the families' feelings when faced with tragedy, had paid off.

"We stopped talking about dead body management and instead started talking about safe and dignified burials," he said in a statement.

"We talked to communities and did our best to understand their beliefs and priorities. Ultimately we earned their trust, and this was critical to success."

The IFRC had begun sending in a local to explain the situation before the volunteers in the yellow hazmat suits showed up, while also involving religious leaders in the efforts and allowing family members to touch the bodies while wearing protective gear, McClelland said.

About 1,500 trained local volunteers were involved in this work, sometimes at a high price.

Many of the volunteers remain stigmatised amid fears they might be carrying the disease, and some are struggling to find work.

"We do recognise that what we were asking of the volunteers was an arduous and dangerous task that would have long-term impacts," McClelland said.

The IFRC, she said, had been providing those in need with psychological and social support as well as food and services, along with small grants to help former volunteers start their own businesses.

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