

Ebola Virus Outbreak in West Africa: Lessons learned about containing the outbreak and preventing dangerous pandemics in the future

Introduction

This activity will help students to improve upon:

- Recognizing the need for preparedness in public health
- Appreciating diversity in global issues
- Recognizing that infectious communicable disease is a global issue
- An appreciation and respect for divergent cultures
- Appreciation of various cultural norms and values
- Adapting global strategies in combating communicable disease
- Developing communication strategies across transnational lines

Target Audience:

Undergraduate and graduate students in the School of Public Health at Georgia State University.

Purpose

The CDC Ebola Exhibit was conceived and constructed to educate individuals around the globe on the essentials needed to combat a deadly disease that could potentially engulf the entire world. The crisis did not for a number of reasons. Early recognition and early intervention using scientific and cultural information about affected populations and the involvement of global organizations and strategies helped the world to effectively combat and contain the epidemic. Transnational efforts to work with foreign governments and populations quite divergent in culture and outlook, recognizing cultural sensitivity, helped to contain an epidemic that potentially could have engulfed the entire global community. This exercise is meant to educate students and citizens of the world about Ebola and the steps necessary to circumvent future catastrophies by pointing out the steps needed to control and prevent deadly diseases through culturally sensitive means. Science is important in disease containment but without knowledge of culture, even the best science is impotent. Public health strategies need to take into account the social and cultural norms in affected individuals. When there is an outbreak of an epidemic or a pandemic, the instinct of the global community is to seek out the science behind the transmission and to use scientifically based methods to combat the epidemic. But in human experience science alone does not prevail. The outbreak of the 2014 Ebola virus disease in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone and the way it was controlled make evident that cultural norms, values and practices of populations contribute to both disease transmission as well as potential control and prevention during an epidemic. Health education campaigns must target and be sensitive to the norms and traditions of native populations to be effective. Studies show that knowledge needs to be filtered through culturally sensitive lenses for populations to seek, understand, process, communicate, and act upon health information. Ignoring indigenous culture can lead to dire consequences in combating dangerous life threatening diseases.

Goals and Objectives:

1. To learn about and understand the Ebola Epidemic that began in 2013

2. To gain an understanding of the impact globally of an outbreak of disease in one part of the world
3. To gain insight into the social and cultural issues that impact pandemics; their spread and containment
4. To learn and understand who the stakeholders are in a global pandemic
5. To understand why the response needs to be global
6. To understand why preparedness is essential for diseases known and unknown
7. To be able to apply the lessons of Ebola to present and future pandemics

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this activity, you will be able to:

- Understand the issues involved in the 2013-2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa
- Articulate the measures needed for a successful campaign against a public health crisis
- Understand the relevance of cultural sensitivity to the campaign to control, treat and prevent Ebola disease and similar communicable diseases globally
- Discuss the importance of both science and culture to health education campaigns and the successful containment of global health crises

Activity

There are two sections to this activity and assignment. Section 1 should be completed with short answer responses and Section 2 with a 1-2 page essay response.

Section I Assignment:

While navigating the Exhibit answer the questions in Parts 1, 2 and 3 below:

Part 1: Introduction

Listening to *Outbreak* produced by Frontline, briefly outline and discuss the Ebola Outbreak in West Africa (2013-2014) including the following information:

- How did it start?
- What is meant by the "Global Failure?"
- Why and how did it spread?
- Why are cultural issues critical in controlling an epidemic like Ebola?
- What were the cultural issues in West Africa that helped to spread the deadly virus?

Part 2: How the outbreak began

How did the outbreak begin? In your response include the following:

- What causes Ebola disease?
- What is the reservoir of the disease?
- How is it transmitted?

- How did the epidemic come to the United States?
- What cultural rituals helped to spread the disease quickly in West Africa?
- What local and or political issues helped contribute to the emergence and spread of the disease?

Why was the initial regional response to Ebola slow and what can be done in the future to enable a much faster response?

In a worldwide epidemic that begins in third world countries, who has responsibility initiating and caring out a response?

- What role did Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) play in the epidemic?
- What role did the World Health Organization play in the epidemic?
- Knowing the role of both and the impact that infectious diseases can play in terms of geopolitics and global health do Western countries have an obligation to their own populations to contribute to health crises in third world countries?

How and why did "Fear, Rumors and Distrust" fuel the spread of Ebola in West Africa? Who and why did some believe that the Ebola epidemic was a hoax?

What was the tragedy in Kenema, Sierra Leone and how was it dealt with? What was learned and why is this important information?

Part 3: The Global Response

What are the two spheres in which global health emergencies operate?

When did the international response to Ebola accelerate? Who was involved in the international response and why? Which U.S. individual laid out the global response and what did he mandate? Which U.S. agency coordinated the broad U.S. response to the Ebola outbreak?

What was the United Nations response to the Ebola epidemic and which of its organizations were involved and why?

What was the "in-country" response to the Ebola epidemic and why was it a challenge? How did the three countries coordinate efforts within the region to combat Ebola and why was this important?

What was the role of the U.S. CDC in the Ebola crisis? What was primary role of the CDC in the health crisis? How and why did the CDC response differ in the three countries fighting Ebola? How did the CDC prepare for the potential introduction of Ebola into the United States?

Section II Assignment:

Comparing the Ebola Crisis to the Coronavirus Pandemic

Using the following questions and talking points develop and write a reflective paper comparing the Ebola epidemic of 2013-2014 to the current Covid 19 pandemic.

1. What comparisons and differences can be drawn between the Ebola crisis and the current Covid 19 crisis?
2. How is the global response to the current Covid-19 pandemic different from that of Ebola?
3. Based on what you have learned about Ebola and what you have experienced with Covid 19 do you believe that there has been a coordinated national and international response to both epidemics?
4. Has there been a transnational response for both epidemics?
5. Compare the infrastructure and organization of the response to both epidemics. Should the United States and the world have taken a much different response to Covid 19 based on what was learned from the Ebola crisis than what it has done?
6. How does testing and contact tracing compare between the two epidemics?
7. Does it appear from the present exhibit that the U.N. and its agencies did much more during the Ebola crisis than has been done during Covid-19? Why or Why not?
8. Cultural issues and sensitivities clearly played a role during the Ebola crisis. Have they also been important considerations in the current Covid 19 pandemic?