Guarded Optimism

What stands between us and scary disease invasions such as the Ebola virus outbreak?

December 3, 2014 By Kate Ferguson

When the Ebola virus leaped from Africa to infect health care workers in Europe and the United States, people expressed fear and concern. Many asked just how prepared America is for emerging infections of this type.

The simple answer is that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) acts as command central for pinpointing and protecting the nation from disease outbreaks, bioterrorism and other health emergencies.

In general, the CDC heads up a network called the Emerging Infections Programs that consists of health departments in 10 states: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, Oregon and Tennessee. The network includes a variety of support staff in local health departments, academic institutions, other federal agencies, and public health and clinical laboratories, as well as teams of infection prevention experts and health care providers.

But the most effective way to end an infectious disease incursion also requires that health care workers on all levels scrupulously follow guidelines and procedures. Workers who collect and handle infectious specimens must follow standards established by the CDC and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. In part, this means wearing appropriate personal protective equipment, such as those yellow or white hazmat suits, gloves, masks, and eye and head protection.

In addition, experts agreed that guidelines should ensure that health care workers in America's hospitals are properly trained.

After the first case of a patient stateside contracting Ebola was confirmed, National Nurses United (NNU), the nation's largest organization of nurses, warned that domestic hospitals weren't ready for this outbreak. A survey of registered nurses across the country revealed that our health care facilities lack adequate disaster planning and policy, education, and the proper supplies and manpower to effectively combat this outbreak.

"This potential exposure of patients and health care workers demonstrates the critical need for planning, preparedness and protection at the highest level in hospitals throughout the nation,"

says Bonnie Castillo, RN, director of NNU.

The CDC readily agreed and outlined the agency's commitment to work closely with hospitals in controlling infectious disease outbreaks of this kind.

"We have staff there around the clock," says Tom Frieden, MD, MPH, the agency's director. "There are intensive efforts under way to train, retrain and supervise staff. The single most important way to get consistency is a site manager. And we have now ensured that 24/7 there will be a site manager who will monitor how personal protective equipment is put on, taken off, and what's done when people are in it." Sure sounds like a plan.

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