

Ebola outbreak: a public health emergency of international concern

After nearly one year following the re-emergence of the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the Ebola outbreak as a “public health emergency of international concern”.^[1] This is only the fifth time in the history of the WHO that it has made such a declaration.

According to Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director General, “it is time for the world to take notice and redouble our efforts. We need to work together in solidarity with the DRC to end this outbreak and build a better health system. We all owe it to these responders — coming from not just WHO but also government, partners and communities — to shoulder more of the burden.”

The threat of the EVD spreading in the region is real. It is the second largest outbreak in history following the West African epidemic of 2011 – 2016. Suspected cases have appeared in Uganda and other parts of the DRC outside the epidemic zones in North Kivu and Ituri regions.

The fear that the epidemic may spread to South Sudan is real. A recent suspected case in Juba Teaching Hospital, which was later confirmed not to be Ebola, had sent shock waves across the country.^[2] Since last year, the Ministry of Health, working with the WHO and its partners, set up surveillance systems to prepare for and manage any outbreak in the country.^[3] Raising the awareness about the potential of EVD spreading into South Sudan is important and it is everyone’s responsibility to be vigilant.

It is rare for WHO to declare an outbreak of a disease as a public health emergency of international concern. Four previous declarations were made. The first time was in 2009 for the outbreak of the H1N1 swine flu pandemic. The second was in May 2014 following the surge in polio cases that threatened the efforts towards eradication. The third in August 2014, came as the Ebola outbreak in West Africa was growing out of control. And the fourth was related to Zika in 2016.^[4]

By declaring the emergency, WHO is putting everyone on notice for what could be a potentially catastrophic outbreak.

We have been warned.

References

1. World Health Organization, [Press Release - Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern](#), WHO, Geneva, 19 July 2019
2. Eye radio News - [‘She doesn’t have Ebola virus’](#) July 2019
3. Richard Lako and Otim Patrick, [Ebola on our doorstep: Ebola Virus Disease preparedness in South Sudan](#), South Sudan Medical Journal, 2018, 11(4)
4. Vox, [The WHO finally declared a public health emergency over Ebola](#), 17 July 2019.

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