
Zaire's worst catastrophe in history: outbreak of the Ebola virus

The Ebola Virus Outbreak of Zaire, 1976

In 1976, a disaster struck the country of Zaire: the Ebola virus. This virus had devastated impacts. The 1976 Ebola virus outbreak in Zaire was so devastating because; doctors had never seen the virus before, no one could discover how the virus had started, hospitals didn't know how to treat patients. Doctors in 1976 were baffled when confronted by the Ebola virus--they had no knowledge of its effects, rendering them also unsure of the symptoms. In addition, no one could discover where the virus came from, who patient zero was, how they were infected, or how the virus was spreading. The greatest contributor to this calamity, however, was the ill-supplied and under-staffed mission hospitals that became overrun with sick patients they had no idea how to treat. The initial problem in fighting the virus was the lack of knowledge about it.

A huge factor in the Ebola outbreak's success was, doctors had never seen the virus before. Doctors from Kinshasa were able to quickly collect blood samples from infected patients before escaping to safety outside the quarantine zone. These samples were spread around the world to labs filled with teams of doctors who could try to solve the mystery of the virus. "In labs across Europe and North America, scientists were peering into microscopes and realizing with a jolt of fear and excitement that they were looking at a virus that had never been seen before." (Patient Zero pg. 121) Among all the scientists and researchers who saw the virus was 27 year old doctor Peter Piot from Belgium. When Dr. Piot investigated the virus further "He learned quickly that the mysterious microbes were lethal: laboratory mice injected with just tiny amounts died within days." (Patient Zero pg. 121). Soon the World Health Organization (WHO) assembled an international team of scientists to go to Zaire to learn more about the virus. Piot was sent to Zaire and quickly set to work going from village to village trying to find out more about the virus. "Researchers eventually identified the Ebola virus as a filovirus - one of only two ever discovered." (Patient Zero pg. 132). In the process of researching the disease Piot discovered more about the small mission hospital that was forced to close due to the virus killing most of its small staff. Piot decided he needed to go and investigate the hospital himself, he wondered if there could be a connection between the hospital and the epidemics rapid spread across the nation.

At first no one could figure out how the virus had started or how it spread from person to person without them ever coming into contact. When Piot went to go to the local hospital he discovered answers to these questions. Piot figured out who patient zero was and how they spread the disease to so many others that he never met. "Mabalo Lokela, the headmaster of the local school, died with high fever, intractable diarrhea and bleeding." (Peter Piot my journey to ground zero). Before Mabalo had died he had gone to the hospital to get a shot to help cure what he and the nurse had thought to be another case of malaria. He was given a shot and sent home without a thought. This is what Piot was discovered, the virus was being spread from the syringe that wasn't sterilized before it was used for another patient, allowing the virus to be transmitted from patient to patient. The question that has still has not been answered is how did Mabalo Lokela contract the Ebola virus? What scientists did learn about the Ebola virus was

that the virus circulates in bats and can infect people through contact with their blood and droppings. A huge factor in the outbreak was that hospitals had no way to effectively treat patients.

The greatest contributor to this calamity, however, was the ill-supplied and under-staffed mission hospitals that became overrun with sick patients they had no idea how to treat. Even before the Ebola virus outbreak, hospitals couldn't treat many patients because of the lack of medical supplies. Mission hospitals could not afford to order extra medicine to treat patients that were sick, the only medicine they had access to was a monthly shipment of essential drugs. Due to this when the outbreak struck, the hospitals were soon filled with patients with similar symptoms to Mabalo and all died within a week. Soon patients infected with the Ebola virus began to spread the virus to the nuns treating them. This led to the hospitals having to close sending infected patients out to the streets. When Dr. Piot went to investigate the hospitals they told him the same thing " 'About one week after infection, patients develop severe fever, diarrhea, and vomiting. They then start bleeding and are affected by "disseminated intravascular coagulation, whereby small blood clots develop in the body's blood vessels, ultimately resulting in generalised organ failure, shock and death one week after the onset of symptoms.' " (My Journey back to Ebola ground zero. By Peter Piot). This information led to the end of the outbreak.

In conclusion, the 1976 Ebola virus outbreak in Zaire was so devastating because; doctors had never seen the virus before, no one could discover how the virus had started, hospitals didn't know how to treat patients. Thanks to the persistence of the research team sent by WHO, doctors were able to stop the outbreak, and prevent it from happening, at this scale, again.