

Health care workers protest conditions faced in treating Ebola

Our reporter
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Nurses and other health care workers in Liberia, Spain and the United States have expressed their discontent over the safety of working conditions in the widening Ebola epidemic, described by the director-general of the World Health Organization as “the most severe acute public health emergency in modern times.”

Health care workers who have come into contact with Ebola patients are at a serious risk of contracting the disease, even when the greatest precautions are taken in modern Western hospitals. At least 417 health care workers are known to have contracted Ebola during the current outbreak. Of these at least 233 have died, accounting for nearly 6 percent of all deaths so far. Nearly all health care worker deaths have occurred in the hardest hit countries of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea.

Last week two nurses, one in Spain and the other in the US state of Texas, became the first known cases of Ebola transmission outside of Africa. The nurses both became ill after treating patients who had contracted the virus in West Africa.

Despite the strike call on Monday by health care workers tending to Ebola patients in Liberia, a majority of workers reported to treatment centers as usual. Members of the National Health Workers Association had threatened to strike over the issue of higher hazard pay and safer working conditions. The NHTWA currently has approximately 1,000 members working in Liberia’s Ebola treatment centers.

NHTWA secretary-general George Williams claimed that the government had coerced union members into reporting to work on Monday without meeting the union’s demands. Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf toured several Ebola clinics in the capital Monrovia over the weekend, appealing to workers not

to walk off the job.

The union had demanded that the government increase official hazard pay to \$700 a month and provide proper protective equipment for workers. They also demanded more thoroughly disinfected workspaces and life insurance. “Health workers do not want to go to strike but they have been provoked to go to strike. Our members are dying. We cannot allow people who are saving lives to die while saving lives,” Williams told reporters.

According to the NHTWA, approximately 80 percent of workers in Liberia’s Ebola clinics do not have access to the necessary protective equipment, including insulated suits, goggles and rubber gloves. Supplies are so limited that many workers are reusing equipment that, according to strict protocol, must be destroyed after coming into contact with Ebola patients to avoid spreading the deadly virus.

Last Friday, Spanish health care workers protested a visit by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy to the Carlos III hospital in Madrid where a nurse is being treated for Ebola. Teresa Romero became the first person to contract Ebola outside West Africa after tending to a priest who was flown back to Spain for treatment after he was infected with the virus in Sierra Leone.

Nurses threw latex gloves and heckled Rajoy’s motorcade in protest over the Spanish government’s handling of the Romero case. Officials have blamed the nurse for contracting the disease after a supposed lapse in protocol on her part. The hospital’s staff has reportedly been overwhelmed by the ongoing situation, with many calling in sick or quitting out of exhaustion and fear of contracting Ebola.

Doctors and nurses at the hospital have complained of inadequate protective equipment and training. The doctor who tested Romero for Ebola, Juan Manuel

Parra, released a statement to the media complaining that the sleeves on his protective suit had been too short and he had checked himself in for isolation and observation at the hospital.

Rajoy's People's Party government has enacted deeply unpopular austerity measures over the last several years that have devastated Spain's health care system. Rajoy cut the national health and social service budget by nearly 14 percent in 2012 and another 16 percent in 2013. The government also enacted a 75 percent cut in the national budget for the training of medical professionals.

The lack of preparedness for the possible spread of Ebola in the United States was highlighted by a survey of 2,000 registered nurses at 750 facilities by National Nurses United (NNU).

The survey found that 76 percent of nurses had not been informed by their employer of any policy regarding the admission of potential Ebola patients, and 85 percent had not been provided education on Ebola in a forum where they could ask questions. Nearly 40 percent of nurses said that their hospital had insufficient supplies of eyewear and protective suits needed when they treat Ebola patients.

At a press conference on Sunday, NNU executive director RoseAnn DeMoro called for an escalation in efforts to properly train nurses in the United States to handle Ebola patients and for the provision of proper protective equipment. "There is no standard short of optimal in protective equipment and hands-on training that is acceptable," DeMoro said.



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