

Australian government refuses to send teams to fight Ebola

Mike Head**18 October 2014**

Even as the World Health Organisation (WHO) warns of a potential global pandemic, the Australian government is continuing to reject pleas by public health professionals to organise desperately needed medical teams to combat the Ebola catastrophe in West Africa.

A senior WHO official, Dr Isabelle Nutall, warned on Thursday that the Ebola death toll will rise this week to more than 4,500, and there could be up to 10,000 new cases a week by early December without urgent action. WHO representatives have stressed that the most critical need is for trained health workers, because of the virtual collapse of the public health systems in the impoverished countries of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea.

The response of Prime Minister Tony Abbott's government is a stark example of the indifference, parochial calculations and short-sightedness exhibited by ruling elites around the world. Apart from making a pitiful donation of \$18 million, Canberra has refused to help fight the worsening crisis, despite UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon now condemning the lack of contribution by "countries who really have capacity ... [to] provide financial and other logistical support."

While the Abbott government rushed to dispatch troops and war planes to the Middle East, initially on the pretext of responding to a humanitarian emergency, it has rebuffed calls to deploy any of the country's Australian Medical Assistance Teams (AusMATs) to Africa. These are units of volunteer doctors, nurses and other health workers, always on standby to be flown in to deal with disasters. The government has even rejected providing logistical support for Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières volunteers.

Half a billion dollars a year has been allocated to join the US-led Iraq-Syria war because that is regarded as

essential for the interests of Australian imperialism, which depends heavily on American backing, including to pursue its own predatory activities in the Asia-Pacific region. No money or resources can be spared for the people of West Africa, however, because in the words of an *Australian* editorial, that area is not in Australia's "sphere of influence."

The Abbott government's response reeks of contempt for the lives of African people. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop told the *Australian Financial Review* yesterday: "I am not going to be the foreign minister that brings Ebola back to Australia."

The government claims that health teams cannot be sent because any infected workers would die before they could be evacuated to Australia, and no other country has agreed to treat them. Abbott has no qualms about sending soldiers to war, but declared it would be "irresponsible" to "order Australian personnel into this very dangerous situation."

Health professionals have exposed this argument as a fraud. An open letter to Abbott organised by the Public Health Association and signed by 114 health professors stated: "We understand Australian government concerns about the need to be able to appropriately evacuate and treat infected health care workers, but this is not a reason for a minimalist response. Other governments have found workable solutions."

The association's CEO, Michael Moore, pointed out that Australia worked closely with allies to move seriously injured soldiers to facilities in places such as Germany. Australian medical epidemiologist Tony Stewart, who chairs the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network in Geneva, likewise rejected the Abbott government's claim. "We've done this before in other crises," he told the *Conversation*. "This situation is dramatically worse than anything we've

seen.”

The government is also covering up the real danger that the chronically under-funded public hospital system in Australia, which has been gutted by spending cuts by successive federal and state governments, Liberal-National and Labor alike, could not cope with a serious domestic Ebola outbreak.

Professor Brian Owler, the president of the Australian Medical Association (AMA), which represents doctors, said his members had concerns about the preparedness of hospitals because of the “recent events” in Dallas, Texas, where a patient died of Ebola after being initially turned away by a hospital and two nurses were infected. Owler said many questions remained about staff training, isolation facilities, cleaning procedures and waste management.

Across Australia, 14 hospital units have specialist containment facilities, but these are very limited. Royal Melbourne Hospital, for example, has just three isolation rooms in the emergency department, another in intensive care, and a special suite. Doctors with years of experience in the public hospital system told the *World Socialist Web Site* that key hospitals already could not cope adequately with emergency patients. Any major incident, let alone an Ebola outbreak, would see facilities and staff overwhelmed, threatening the treatment of hundreds of other patients.

Doctors are voicing fears that GPs and their staff could be in danger, because the public is being advised to “contact a GP” in the event of a fever. Professor Raina MacIntyre, professor of Infectious Disease Epidemiology at the University of New South Wales, told the *Medical Observer* that doubts now existed about how easily Ebola could be transmitted. She warned that if “someone walks into a GP’s surgery with Ebola,” there was a “high probability” that the receptionist, other patients in the waiting room and the GP were “going to end up dead.”

Health Minister Peter Dutton responded with a series of media interviews, insisting that the hospital system is well-prepared, while also asserting that “the threat to our country is very, very low.” His PR campaign was discredited, however, when he visited the Royal Brisbane and Women’s Hospital. In what was intended to be a reassuring media photo opportunity, the clinical staff wore personal protective equipment that left their necks exposed, replicating the defects in the equipment

worn by the infected nurses in Texas.

Signs of cover-up emerged in the northern city of Cairns, where two doctors were suspended from duty on Tuesday for speaking to the media about their concerns regarding the treatment of local nurse Sue-Ellen Kovack. She contracted a fever after returning from treating Ebola patients in Africa as a Red Cross volunteer.

The Brisbane *Courier Mail* reported that the doctors criticised the use of a busy emergency ward, visited by up to 200 people a day, to monitor Kovack, instead of her being isolated in an infectious diseases unit. The Australian Salaried Medical Officers Association said the doctors’ suspension was an “outrageous” attempt to prevent medical staff from speaking out.

In the face of the outcry from health professionals, and mounting public concern, Labor Party leaders this week belatedly sought to distance themselves from the Abbott government, after more than two months of giving bipartisan support to its refusal to do any more than donate \$18 million.

While still not criticising the inadequacy of that funding—she described it as “not bad”—deputy Labor leader Tanya Plibersek made a vague call on the government to make evacuation arrangements with the US or other allies so that Australian volunteers could be sent to Africa.

Plibersek couched her plea within the same narrow nationalist framework as the government, objecting that it would be “increasingly difficult to protect Australia” if the Ebola contagion was allowed to spread to the Asia-Pacific region.

She also stressed Labor’s continued unity with the government on its participation in the Middle East war, underscoring the ongoing bipartisan front within the political establishment.



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