
Ebola epidemic spawns black market in survivors' blood

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Having already killed 2,400 people and infected nearly 5,000 others, and with no cure in sight, the Ebola virus has triggered the growth of a black market in what is known as convalescent serum, the protein base of blood that has been collected from survivors of the epidemic, according to the World Health Organization (WHO)

The serum is considered to be especially rich in antibodies that fight against the disease, and has already been administered to some patients, including Rick Sacra, an American health worker who has received transfusions from a survivor of the deadly virus.

"We are supporting use of whole blood and convalescent serum to manage Ebola virus disease in the West African Ebola outbreak," WHO spokeswoman Margaret Harris told Politico. *"Whole blood has already been used in a number of centers."*

The main emphasis of the serum treatment is to "buy time" for those infected, allowing the body to build up strength to recover.

"To survive, you have to build up enough antibodies to neutralize the virus," Phil Smith, medical director of the bio-containment unit at the hospital in Omaha, Nebraska, where Sacra is being treated, told reporters last week. *"We're hoping to buy him some time, in other words, to give him antibodies to help his immune system battle the Ebola virus and let him get ahead of the curve."*

There is no proven medication to treat the Ebola virus, although an experimental treatment called ZMapp is still in the development stages. This has forced those infected with Ebola, feeling they have nothing to lose, to search for alternative forms of treatment.

As word spreads about the possible benefits of the convalescent serum, the demand for 'survivors' blood' has increased, together with all of the inherent risks of being infected with other equally deadly diseases, including HIV, as well as possible anaphylactic shock due to an allergic reaction to the serum.

WHO Director-General Margaret Chan told reporters that the UN watchdog is committed to helping countries eliminate the illegal trade in convalescent serum, while at the same time conducting trial experiments with serum-based treatments. The emphasis, however, was placed on protecting people from contaminated blood transfusions that are believed to exist in the black market supply chain.

"It is in the interest of individuals not to just get convalescent serum without properly done going through the proper standard and the proper testing because it is important that there may be other infectious vectors that we need to look at," Chan told a press conference at the WHO headquarters in Geneva.

The consequences of people going to extremes to find a cure was demonstrated by [a single healer](#) in an isolated border village in Sierra Leone. The woman claimed to be in possession of special powers to cure the deadly disease.

"She was claiming to have powers to heal Ebola. Cases from Guinea were crossing into Sierra Leone for treatment," top medical official, Mohamed Vandi, who was based in the crisis-struck Kenema district, told AFP.

"She got infected and died. During her funeral, women around the other towns got infected," he told the agency. This set off a chain reaction of infections, helping to further transmit the disease.

Meanwhile, the rise of a blood black market has triggered concern over the security of medical supplies shipped to West Africa from foreign countries. On Tuesday, President Obama announced a 3,000-troop commitment to Africa in which the Department of Defense would provide military medical doctors to train up to 500 healthcare workers a week to handle the crisis, the New York Times reported.

Hospitals in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone - the epicenter of epidemic - are being pushed to the physical limits by what the WHO is calling the deadliest Ebola outbreak in history.
