Ebola What is really known? And should the CDC shut up?

By ACSH Staff — August 8, 2014

If you have noticed the absence of any mention of the ongoing ebola outbreak from us, there is a reason. Unlike many people who have been shooting their mouths off about the infection often contradicting each other we have not had the expertise to address this properly. This has now changed.

ACSH friend Dr. Rich Whitley, a leading virologist in the US by any measure, has cleared a few things up, while at the same time revealing that there are huge gaps in the knowledge about the infection. This has undoubtedly led to multiple, often conflicting stories. They are impossible to miss, since this news is routinely on the front page of most newspapers.

Worse still, know-nothings like Michael Fumento, whose op-ed [1] in the August 7th New York Post entitled Why Ebola s nothing to worry about make the disease seem like athlete s foot, gives the impression that this is a big nothing. [1]

On the other hand, today s front page article [2] in the New York Times, Don t Touch the Walls : Ebola Fears Infect an African Hospital paints a terrifying picture of what is going on in Africa, which will no doubt ramp up the fear level around the world, despite the fact that they are only discussing Africa.

Perhaps more troubling is what information is coming from the CDC, which seems to be changing its mind daily. The head of the agency, Dr. Tom Frieden, who we have criticised many times in the past concerning other issues, can t seem to make up his mind.

Yesterday, in a special hearing before Congress, Frieden said that it was inevitable that Ebola would reach the US, but we are confident that there will not be a large Ebola outbreak in the US. We do not view Ebola as a significant danger to the US because it is not transmitted easily, does not spread from people who are not ill.

On the other hand, Frieden has said that it is inevitable that we will see some cases in the US.

How can he know any of this? According to Dr. Whitley, he cannot: Regarding the natural history of Ebola, we know very, very little. Specifically, we do not know the duration of shedding prior to
the onset of symptoms.

ACSH s Dr. Josh Bloom, a former researcher in virology explains, The prevailing opinion, at least this week, is that people are only contagious when they are experiencing symptoms. But, this may be false. The duration of shedding the time where newly formed viruses are released is not known, so it is possible that an infected person could be contagious before the onset of symptoms. This makes the spread of the disease much easier.

Whitley s message is both comforting and cautionary: From my perspective, the risk for US citizens is minimal unless you are a healthcare worker in the endemic countries. And a significant contributor to outbreak was a violation of infection control or spread would not have occurred.

So, there is very little for us to worry about now, but it is impossible to predict the future course of the epidemic because there is not enough known about the infection for anyone to draw some of the conclusions that we have been hearing.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of this affair is the competence or lack thereof of the CDC the agency that will be responsible for controlling any outbreaks that might pop up in the US.

Frieden said, "We have been able to stop every prior Ebola outbreak, and we will stop this one."

To which Dr. Bloom replies, Forgive me if I am less than inspired by his statement. First, there has never been an ebola outbreak outside of Africa. He makes it sound like the CDC has been fighting off Ebola-infected immigrants and outbreaks periodically when in fact the U.S. has never had even one case of the infection, until two patients were flown in from Africa recently for emergency medical care. Second, this is the same agency that tripped over a box of smallpox samples (which no one knew about) and was essentially playing foosball with live anthrax, which resulted in dozens of researchers being exposed to, and being treated for the infection. Both of the incidents happened during June of this year.

Dr. Bloom s Science 2.0 opinion piece, Smallpox in a Big Box With No Locks makes perfectly clear his thoughts on this matter. And then some.