

AN UNSTOPPABLE CONTAGION?

International politics and the response to the Ebola outbreak

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A ‘threat to the existence of Liberia’ ^{www}. These were the words used by Liberia’s Defence Minister to portray the danger of the Ebola virus outbreak which has hit Western Africa. Combined with phrases such as ‘lockdown’ and ‘biological warfare’, the media has ensured that the world is well aware of the threat posed by Ebola. Yet just how deadly is the disease? Could its spread have been contained – even prevented – at an earlier stage? What emerges from documentation within the *Chatham House Online Archive* are several alarming parallels between the spread of similarly contagious diseases in the past and that of Ebola, prompting the question: how much have we really learnt from the past?

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One of the major themes to arise from surveying the archival material is the extent to which fear of a disease may quickly surpass its actual threat. In their speech given in September 2003, Colin McInnes and Lee Kelley draw similarities between Ebola and the West Nile virus; both are viewed as neglected diseases which still have serious implications for the countries in which they are present ^{IPG}. Yet the speakers suggest that these diseases have slipped under the radar given the dominance of the SARS disease at the time. This feeds interestingly into the speakers’ wider contention



of European fascination with the ‘exotic’; ‘infectious diseases always attract more attention than they perhaps warrant’ ^{IPG}. In light of the recent Ebola outbreak, it may be added that this is to the exclusion of other, even more life-threatening diseases. AIDS is one example which still rages today, yet receives far less media attention than it once did.

The present attention given to the Ebola virus can be further contextualised with reference to a speech given by Ron Behrens and Julian Jessop in 2003. Here, the speakers use the Ebola virus to highlight the inadequacy of African healthcare facilities; most revealingly, they indicate that if Africa cannot cope with such a relatively minor disease as Ebola, then it has little hope of containing more deadly infections ^{IPG}. Ebola is therefore perceived as ‘much less of a threat’ than respiratory diseases such as SARS, since it is a ‘physical or one-lead contact’ disease ^{IPG}. To read such an interpretation in the current climate of fear towards Ebola is particularly striking, indicating just how distorted perceptions of infectious disease can become in a short space of time.

Interestingly, the archival material also suggests why this distortion can happen, revealing a close relationship between fear of the disease and the strategies developed for dealing with them. In their aforementioned speech, McInnes and Kelley argue that disease is entangled with questions of national



security, with infections too readily perceived as a threat to the developed world by countries in the developing world [IPG](#). This political element to containing disease is touched upon by Sara Davies in her article 'Securitizing Infectious Disease'. Like McInnes and Kelley, she feels that Western countries give too much attention towards fears of an outbreak reaching them, rather than attempting to prevent such outbreaks in the first place [IPG](#). Similarly, an article by Randolph Kent in *The World Today* uses the bird flu virus to show how international politics too often take precedent over managing the spread of disease in localities [IPG](#). This leads to short-term plans being put in place rather than a longer-term strategy for coping with this type of threat [IPG](#).

Perhaps this fixation among developed nations with protecting their own populations accounts for the labels of inadequacy which often arise when discussing the international response to infectious disease. Echoing Kent's comments that the bird flu virus lacked any coherent response are those of medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres, which has described the response to the Ebola outbreak as 'lethally inadequate' [www](#). Only two years previously, Behrens and Jessop had given an alarmingly similar message in their aforementioned speech on the SARS pandemic, leading to calls for an improved response system to cope with this type of outbreak [IPG](#).

Not only had this failed to be implemented by the 2005 bird flu outbreak, but, it seems, has still not developed successfully today. The Ebola virus has not been confined to West Africa, affecting more developed countries; in Europe, Spain is the latest country to face its threat [www](#). As the world struggles again to contain an apparently less virulent disease, it is difficult not to question how far we have learnt from parallel outbreaks in the past decade. There is evidently still plenty of room for improvement in the international response; until this occurs, infectious diseases such as Ebola will continue to appear as unstoppable. [GALE](#)

Read and view extracts from referenced *Chatham House Online Archive* articles

McInnes, Colin, and Kelley Lee. "Health, Foreign Policy & Security: Beyond Killer Bugs & Bio-Terrorism." RIIA/8/6495. Chatham House, London. 10 Sept. 2003 [PDF](#)

Behrens, Ron, and Julian Jessop. "SARS - A Twenty-First Century Pandemic? Scenarios for its Impact on the World." RIIA/8/6468. Chatham House, London. 30 Apr. 2003 [PDF](#)

Davies, Sara E. "Securitizing infectious disease." *International Affairs* 84.2 (2008) [PDF](#)

Kent, Randolph. "Bird Flu: Worried but not doing enough." *The World Today* 61.12 (2005) [PDF](#)

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