Episode 54: Panic in the Streets

Introduction

In 2014, there was a record-setting outbreak of the deadly virus Ebola. This outbreak mostly took place in a few countries in western Africa, but there were also a small number of cases in the United States and Europe. Ebola is a virus, like the cold. Ebola is much harder to catch than the cold, but is a much worse disease.

In this episode, we follow epidemiologists who are trying to stop an Ebola outbreak in Liberia. Ebola spreads through bodily fluids such as blood, so usually the risk of exposure is relatively low. But in this situation, epidemiologists and police find out that a victim from a gang murder tested positive for Ebola – which means a number of people were exposed to his blood.

This introduces a whole range of complicated issues. How do you solve a murder and protect the suspects from a deadly disease at the same time? How do police work with gangs to stop this outbreak, when gangs and police are not usually on the same side?

The epidemiologists also discuss how important trust is when dealing with a public health crisis. They talk to Shankar Vedantam about how trust is built and how trust is lost between health workers, the government, and the people of an affected country.

Study Guide Questions

Where did this outbreak happen? Name the country and the city

How did police find out that the victim of the murder had Ebola?

Since he already passed away, why did it matter so much that this man had Ebola?
What is contact tracing?

In the episode, the epidemiologists talk about mistrust towards the government and international organizations. What are some of reasons that they give to explain why there was this mistrust?

What did the government do when the Ebola outbreak first started?

Did this strategy work?

What did they forget to put in a large Ebola treatment unit?
Reflect on this misstep. Why is it so important that they didn’t include this? What does this communicate to people?

Shankar and the epidemiologists talk about three strands of the web that made this such a complicated case.

1. They had to persuade the young men in the gang to go to the quarantine facility.
2. The woman who ran the drug house (Drug Mama) might be sick too.
3. They couldn’t track down Time Bomb.

**Pause the episode.** Break into small groups and think about how you would handle each of these three strands.

1. How would you persuade the young men in the gang to go to the quarantine facility?

2. How would you find out if “Drug Mama” had Ebola? If she does, what would you do about it?

3. How would you track down Time Bomb?
**Complete the episode.** What did the epidemiologists end up doing to deal with each of these strands? How does it compare with your ideas?

At the end of the episode, Athalia Christie talks about some of the cultural changes that she and other health workers had to ask people to make. What are they?

Throughout this episode, the government and public health workers have to make a lot of trade-offs in order to stop the Ebola virus from spreading. Did any of these decisions seem odd to you? Where there any trade-offs you wouldn’t have made?

Reflect on the theme of trust. What do you take away from this episode about the role of trust in our lives?