The Establishment of Global Medical Supply Banks Would Aid in the Response to Disease Outbreaks and Disasters

Tag words: medical supplies, disease outbreaks, WHO, NGO, nonprofit organizations, Red Cross

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Summary: The recent Ebola outbreak illustrated that the world doesn’t have an efficient emergency system to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Lack of quickly obtainable medical supplies around the world will lead to a slower response to medical crises. The role of the World Health Organizations is not to provide medical care and supplies but to identify potential increases of infectious diseases and to inform and help guide the governments of those countries in what to do in response. We have requested that the Red Cross consider establishing medical supply banks around the globe that could, upon notification by the WHO, quickly distribute medical supplies to areas that need them.

Video Link:

The Issue: When there are medical outbreaks many countries don’t have the supplies to control it

Ebola and global outbreaks:

As defined by the World Health Organization, a disease outbreak is the occurrence of cases of disease in excess of what would normally be expected in a defined community, geographical area or season. An outbreak may occur in a restricted geographical area, or may extend over several countries. It may last for a few days or weeks, or for several years. When a disease outbreak occurs over a large area or worldwide it becomes a pandemic.

Many pandemics have shaped history, catching nations unprepared and vulnerable to large death numbers. Among thses diseases are yellow fever, malaria, cholera, influenza, AIDS and smallpox. They each killed thousands of people, caused panic in the population and as a result of these catastrophic events, served as the motivation to redefine health policies. Yellow fever for example, influenced the making of the Panama canal (1). Malaria continues to limit the economic growth of many countries. The 1918 influenza epidemic killed more people than World War I and decreased the lifespan in the United States by about 10 years (2). In the 1980s, the AIDS epidemic sent U.S cities into panic. It became a death sentence and a source of controversy. In 1980, smallpox became the only disease to ever be eradicated through the use vaccinations (3). Unfortunately, there isn’t always a preventative vaccine or cure to infectious diseases. In some cases the lack of knowledge about the particular disease or poor sanitary conditions common to the time period were at fault for the epidemics the world suffered. With improvements in science and sanitary practices many dangerous infectious diseases have become manageable.
The role of WHO
Most people in the developed world became aware of the Ebola outbreak when it was at its worst and affecting multiple continents. This was due to the fact that most people don’t concern themselves with things that don’t directly affect them. It is when one fears for ones own safety that things become important. As more countries became affected with cases of Ebola, people started to ask how the outbreak got out of control when Ebola has been around for years. They wanted to know whose job it was to keep this from happening.

The World Health Organization (WHO) is the authority for health within the United Nations (4). Their role is to detect infectious diseases with the potential of spreading and inform country leaders of the around the world of the potential dangers. WHO had been informing countries of the Ebola outbreak since it first was detected in late March of 2014 before it became a global epidemic (5). Unfortunately, WHO’s actions are limited by many factors. There are certain things that go beyond the scope of their duties that need to get done.

Medical Supply Bank: Why It Is Needed

The ideal way to deal with an epidemic of an infectious disease is to find a cure. However, finding a cure can be decades away. The more effective way of dealing with an epidemic is to be able to contain it. One of the biggest contributors to the spread of infectious diseases is the lack of medical supplies in areas of low sanitary conditions. The combination of these misfortunes makes anyone vulnerable to infection. A medical supply bank should be established to provide medical supplies on a large scale for emergencies. Currently the world doesn’t have an emergency plan for the spread of diseases on a large scale. WHO has emergency response programs and is affiliated with other nonprofit organizations that it relies on to help (5). These other organizations are not prepared to treat large populations of people in a short amount of time. Medical supplies are needed to prevent future global outbreaks by containing infectious diseases when people are being treated.

An article by Patterson Clark published in The Washington Post on October 15 2014 http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/page/national/liberia-plans-ahead-for-more-ebola-cases/1380/ demonstrated the devastating realization that the need for medical supplies was not being met during the Ebola crisis. The supplies needed where items that should be available to any medical staff. Of the needed supplies the ones that stand out the most are the examining gloves, plastic buckets and face masks because these are items that are needed for treating and diagnosing most diseases.
What made Ebola stand out amongst other diseases is its fatality rates and how quickly it is able to spread. Times have changed and globalization is increasing more and more. People are able to travel across the world in a matter of hours. This increases the potential of spreading diseases to areas that have never been affected by the particular disease. Having basic medical supplies is the key to being prepare and reducing fatalities.

**How Can Medical Supplies be Obtained?**

**Finding Donors**

There are many nonprofit health aid organizations that are able to function on a global scale. One of the contributing factors to the success of non profit organizations is their ability to bring donations in the form of money, supplies and time. Unfortunately many new nonprofit organizations fail to find a dominant and stable source of funding. The key to avoiding this is to match the nonprofit organization with funding sources that share the same values. The more similar the values of the funding resources are to those of the nonprofit organization, the higher the chances of the finding resources making those donations. It is in the best interest of the nonprofit organization to carefully search for funding sources that best match their values and financial need (6). It is also important to study patterns in the willingness to donate to certain causes of some corporations. For example, big corporations will donate to causes involving hunger and health issues. Therefore, it would be wise for emerging nonprofit organizations whose purpose is to provide international health aid to target corporations when searching for means of funding their organization.

Nonprofit organizations wishing to expand must remember that they must secure donations from multiple corporations or companies that support their ideas and work (6). The matching that is done should be between nonprofit and multiple donors. This counts as one source of funding. Other sources of funding shouldn’t be ignored but priorities must be set. It is up to the particular organization to decide which source would benefit them more then focus their main efforts on that source. The American Kidney Fund (AKF) founded in the 1970s, is a great example of an organization expanding successfully. It started out as a small organization with very low revenue. When their funding efforts became more focused on corporations, the organization grew quickly. Their revenues more than tripled by the year 2000. Four years later, their revenue was twelve times that of its original revenue (6). Other nonprofit organizations that have benefited from strategies like these include Youth Villages and Population Service International.

**Encouraging Donations**

In the United States, there are many organizations that collect donations of medical supplies (7). These supplies range from medical beds to crutches people no longer need. The same idea can be applied here. Many people who have had a fractured leg or similar injury are given crutches. After their leg has healed, people are left with the burden of finding a place where to put the no longer needed crutches. A couple of organizations take advantage of this burden and offer to take the crutches of the person’s hands to use it for a good cause. The crutches then end up in a small organization that supplies reusable medical items to people who can’t afford them. Programs such as the Thurston County Medical Equipment Bank hand the item out in the form of a loan, so the person who received the reused crutches for example, won’t have the burden of keeping them when the item is no longer needed (7). In the end, the person gets rid of an item that was just taking up space and the program gains supplies; a win, win situation.
Medical companies can be encouraged to donate the material that would not be reusable. There would be incentives such as tax deductions and good will advertisement for their company. The nonprofit organization can put links on the organizations website to the IRS website (or the corresponding website for the organization’s country). The IRS website includes directions on how to file for tax deductions and what donations lead to greater deductions (8). Making information about tax deduction procedures available to the public can make people more willing to donate.

Another approach might be the philanthropic allure that donating might give a corporation. Though it would be nice for people to have altruistic approach towards donating, many times this isn’t the case. Nonprofit organizations must learn to use this to their advantage. They must make potential donors feel empowered by their contribution. Visiting individual donors to explain the goals of the organization will make the interaction between organization and donor more personal. If people see that a particular company has good charitable habits they might be encouraged to become customers. Potential donors will feel the importance of their contribution. This method encourages future donations from the same donors (9).

Who Will Benefit?

Impact on employment:

Diseases pose a threat not only health but to economic stability as well. When an infectious disease becomes an epidemic, the economic impact can be even greater than the damage chronic diseases can cause. Outbreaks reduce the workforce. Employee presence can easily influenced by employees becoming infected, taking care of a sick family member or fear of becoming infected with the disease. A reduced workforce will cause companies to lose profits and become at risk for bankruptcy. One example of the devastating effects outbreaks have on the workforce is what happened to agriculture in Liberia during the Ebola outbreak. Research done by the Food and Agriculture Organization shows that 39% of Liberia’s GDP comes from agriculture. The outbreak created disruptions in the agricultural workforce and not enough work was able to get done. Consequently the price of the harvested crops doubled to make up for the loss in profits (10). This pattern can become a vicious cycle which the country fall into further economic down fall.
Global Trade Impact

The loss of regional and international markets has greater economic effects than those of local markets. The cholera outbreak of 1991 cost Peru about 770 million US dollars (11). This was brought on by the social implications of the disease. Panic-induced countries restricted travel and imports to infected areas.

While the economic impact on trade is negative for many countries, some learn to thrive from it. The best example of this is Cuba during the 2014 Ebola outbreak. Cuba has earned a great reputation for educating great doctors and sending them abroad. Cuba’s biggest exports today are doctors (12). They made a great impression to the world by showing the range of their medical strength.

Economic Impact of Outbreaks

The main economic effects arise from the uncoordinated and sometimes panicky efforts by large numbers of individuals to avoid infection. These efforts, such as fleeing from the area of an outbreak or reducing contact with other people, lead to sharply reduced demand for many service sector activities, as occurred during the SARS outbreak. Under conditions of high uncertainty, poor information, and emotional stress during an outbreak of infectious disease, people can spread unjustified panic. This kind of thinking may lead to a lack of better judgment, which in turn brings the country into further economic chaos (13).
Doctors Who Volunteer Overseas

Methods to ensure that people treating and diagnosing others don’t become infected themselves should be of the greatest importance. If those with the knowledge to treat the sick become ill themselves the disease being combated becomes a greater threat to the public because it decreases resources, in this case in the form of doctors and medical staff, even more. "I was collecting blood samples from patients. We did not have enough protective equipment to use and I started developed the same symptoms. I then received laboratory confirmation that I had contracted Ebola.” stated Kiiza Isaac, a nurse from Uganda (14). MSF put a lot of effort to ensure the safety of their workers during the recent ebola crisis. But safety can’t be guaranteed when the basic necessities to protect medical staff are limited.

Part of the reasons why so many doctors were infected with Ebola is that the exams to diagnose the infection put doctors in a vulnerable spot. According to MSF accounts, such test to diagnose or treat Ebola must be done under “maximum biological containment” (14). Without sufficient supplies, this condition can’t be met. If doctors are not protected, many countries will resist sending their doctors to help out. This can lead to a cascade of chaos in which the disease continued to spread.

Current International Health Aid Available

MSF

Doctors without borders (MSF) is an independent, medical nonprofit humanitarian organization that provides emergency help to people affected by armed conflict, epidemics and natural disasters. They also provide aid to people, that for one reason or another, have been excluded from healthcare. MSF offers assistance to people based on need, regardless of their religion, gender or political values (15). MSF was founded in Paris, France in 1971. Today MSF works internationally with 24 other associates to bring quality to medical care and help those in crisis. One of the things that make MSF such an effective health aid organizations is the fact that they operate independently of any government and remain neutral of armed conflicts.

Red Cross

The Red Cross provides shelter, food and emotional support to victims of disasters. It also teaches people skills that save lives and supports military members and their families. It is a nonprofit organization that depends on its volunteers (16).

Oxfam America

Oxfam is an international health aid organization comprised of 17 organizations which work together to provide aid to more than 90 countries. Their mission is to fight against poverty. They work with people in poverty to find ways to better themselves. When a crisis strikes, Oxfam supplies water and personal hygiene supplies and equipment and sanitation to treatment and care centers. They also train front line community health workers and provide them with personal protective clothing (17).

How these organizations are helping
Nepal Earthquake

On April 25, 2015, a magnitude 7.8 earthquake hit Nepal. Its devastating effects reached into Tibet and northern parts of India. It has been named one of the worst natural disasters to strike the Himalayas in years. As of the early part of May 2015, there are more than 8,400 dead, more than 9,200 injured and eight million affected across Nepal.

Oxfam workers are in Nepal providing clean water, toilets and shelter to thousands of survivors. The Red Cross is also doing their part to help out in Nepal. They are providing search and rescue teams for the missing. The aid is being provided to the injured in the form of blood donations to medical facilities. About nineteen thousand non-food relief kits have been made available to Nepal by the Red Cross. These kits include clothes, kitchen sets and mosquito nets as well as other needed items. Mobilization efforts have also been started to relocate the survivors to safer areas. MSF sent help to Nepal and currently they have about 60 staff members located there. They have assessed the situation in hospitals in order to determine the kind of help they can provide. This helps them set up their surgical teams where they are needed. Several hospitals around affected areas have are being provided with doctors from Bir hospital. They will set up consultation areas as needed.

A problem faced when providing aid is that Kathmandu Teaching Hospital has been receiving an increased number of patients coming from other hospitals requiring dialysis for chronic patients. There is a shortage of dialysis machines. MSF is doing the best they can by donating wound-dressing kits and considering other options for supporting specific hospitals in Kathmandu according to their needs.

Outbreaks

Although current humanitarian health aid organizations do an incredible job helping victims of disasters and infectious diseases, a lot more is needed. The main goals of many of the current health aids available differ from that of a medical supply bank. These organizations commit their time to providing shelter, water, doctors, etc. Their resources are distributed among the different forms of aid that they provide. For example, in June 2012, Haiti faced an epidemic of cholera. Fearing the situation would get worse, the Haitian Red Cross contacted the national Red Cross to send supplies. Medical supplies were sent in bulk and kept in the country on standby. Red Cross workers were sent over to Haiti at the height of the epidemic and remained there until the situation was under control. The Haitian Red Cross had depleted their resources and needed the national Red Cross to back them up. A medical supply bank program would serve as backup to reinforce international health aid organizations with medical supplies.

Community Action: Sending the Idea for Medical Supply Banks to WHO and NGOs

In a letter sent to WHO and affiliated organization, we proposed the creation of medical supply banks with a mission to provide international health aid. We described the need for the program and included suggestions of possible ways to establish a medical supply bank. Our proposal also discussed possible donors, locations and incentives that would motivate countries to help.

Small Scale Medical Supply Programs
Currently there are small scale programs that collect medical supplies and send them to nonprofit organizations in third world countries. For example, in the United States there several groups that have made it part of their mission to collect essential medical supplies to send abroad. However, many of these current programs do not have as their primary mission the collection and distribution of medical supplies as they provide many essential services that occupy their time and money (1). In particular, InterVol, a nonprofit organization which has it main offices in Rochester, NY, sends supplies to 17 national humane societies, 75 hospitals and clinics worldwide as well as 6 local school districts. It specializes in recovering and redistributing medical supplies and equipment and has been around for 25 successful years (19). Another great example is The International Medical Equipment Collaborative (IMEC) in Massachusetts which also provides many underdeveloped countries with medical equipment as well as equipment solutions for agriculture and education (1). The types of medical supplies collected by these organizations range from sterile surgical supplies to surgical instruments, examination tables, hospital scrubs, crutches, gauze, incubators and defibrillators, to essential medical supplies like masks, gloves and sutures.

Programs like these demonstrate that the plan to establish a global medical supply banks is possible if sufficient effort is devoted to it. One may wonder why programs like these haven’t already developed into bigger organizations. The problem many of them face is not being able to pay for shipping fees themselves. In fact, most of the already established organizations that send medical supplies abroad require that either the recipient or the sender pay for shipment fees. A medical reserve that operates at a global scale with the sole focus of supplying medical supplies on an emergency basis to prevent outbreaks would make up for the financial and supply shortcomings of current small organizations.

**Food Bank Analogy - How Medical Supply Banks Would Work**

A food bank is a place that provides food for those who cannot, on their own, financially afford the food they need to survive. They do so by distributing and repackaging food to individuals or similar organizations and charities. Food banks get most of their food from either monetary donations to purchase food or actual donations of food. These donations can come from anywhere; local or national corporate donors and by holding local food drives and donations made by individuals in the community in which they serve (20). How food is distributed depends on the particular food bank. Food can be distributed to member organizations, which are organizations that get food in bulk from food banks for similar purposes like soup kitchens or churches. These member organizations have guidelines for eligibility. If a small group of people or one person needs a reasonable amount of food, one might go to the nearest food bank and wait in line to get available food for free.

Medical supply banks could be set up to work like food banks do. Countries that have a need of medical supplies would get the supplies quicker and easier than how they currently do. Medical supply banks would package and distribute medical supplies to affiliated organizations such as other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and hospitals with a demonstrated need. The medical supply banks could serve as a source of supplies to areas in response to natural or man-made disasters or to combat the spread of diseases that potentially could cause epidemics.

**Medical Supplies for Emergencies**
Countries in the developed world don’t generally have a lack of medical supplies. Emergency situations can arise where even in developed countries there is a desperate need to rapidly disperse medical supplies that may not be immediately available. A medical supply bank would mostly help out third world nations because they have few resources to control outbreaks that could potentially spread around the globe. This program should not take the place of governmental actions though many third world nations lack adequate health policies due to governmental action (21). It should serve as a way to control/ handle a medical crisis that could not be prevented. Help would also be provided to countries whose lack of governmental action has exacerbated a shortage of medical supplies. There should be penalties enforced by the international community on the governing bodies of those countries that don’t make an effort to better their countries’ health policies.

**Suggested locations**

Medical supply banks should be dispersed globally, perhaps between locations that are the most accessible and convenient to WHO and affiliated emergency response agencies. They should also be located at or near regions that are known to have diseases with the potential to become outbreaks.

**Suggested Financing**

On November 18, 2014, World Bank chief Jim Yong Kim called for a global accord, orchestrated by the World Bank or other organizations to provide funds in case of pandemic emergency (22). He also warned of the social and economic dangers outbreaks can cause. This should be interpreted as an investment. Nations around the world should consider the negative implications that outbreaks bring to everyone and not just the country with the disease.

According to research done on how to efficiently obtain funding for non profit organizations, organizations have to be assertive and go after the money to fulfill their mission. In many cases, it may seem like so much focus on money deviates from the goal of a non profit organization but the only way the organization will be able to achieve their purpose is if they are able to pay for it (6). Financial stability must be achieved before the organization can start seeing progress toward their cause.

**Workers/Volunteers**

Nonprofit organizations should have strong and competent leaders. It will be difficult for people to want to volunteer their time or money if they think that the organization is unstable or comprised of people that are ill-equipped. Having strong leaders will not only encourage others to join the cause but also increase the chances of the particular organization expanding and succeeding.

Volunteers can help nonprofit organizations by providing services to developing programs and facilitating the strategic planning needed (23). For this to be possible, many volunteers would have to professionals. Therefore, some incentive should be provided to encourage people with the needed skills to volunteer. This could in the form of community hours where they would receive recognition and perhaps services that they may need in community organized exchanges like those established by hOurworld.org. When an organization is able to obtain many capable as well as dedicated volunteers, financial burdens can be eased.
Enthusiastic volunteers can also serve as ambassadors to the community by encouraging others to volunteer their time, money or supplies.

The following letter was sent to the Red Cross on May 8, 2015 to request that they consider making “Medical Supply Banks” as one of their primary missions. Since the American Red Cross and the National Red Cross don’t have general email addresses to send letters to, we sent the letter as an inquiry. The link to the international Red Cross Inquiry is http://www.redcross.org/contact-us/international-reconnecting-families-inquiry-form
The one for the American Red Cross is http://www.redcross.org/contact-us/general-inquiry

Dear Red Cross,

The Ebola outbreak of 2014 demonstrated the need for additional medical supplies that were not immediately available putting both caregivers, patients and populations at risk. Although there are numerous humanitarian health aid organizations the provide help, their main focus isn’t to provide medical supplies. We are proposing that the Red Cross establish “Medical Supply Banks” strategically placed at multiple locations around the world that would provide medical supplies in the event of an outbreak or disaster.

Medical supply banks could be set up to work much like food banks. Countries that have a need for medical supplies would be able to obtain much needed supplies quickly. Medical supply banks would package and distribute medical supplies to affiliated NGOs and hospitals with a demonstrated need. Donations of money or supplies by individuals, organizations and businesses would receive tax deductions.

The chief of the World Bank, JimYong Kim announced in November 2014 that we should be investing in world health and encouraged the world to raise funds in an effort to establish preventative controlling methods where there are outbreaks. He essentially opened the floor to discussions about funding programs; perhaps that would provide financial support for the roll out, operation and stocking of the medical supply banks.

We believe that the Red Cross is the optimal organization for establishing Medical Supply Banks globally. The Red Cross has provided such services (collecting and doling out supplies) for a long time. The difference here is that the Medical Supply Banks would have brick and mortar locations throughout the world every x number of square miles possibly located in every country, trained staff, and a high level of organization and inventory control required to make the banks sustainable.

We hope that you will seriously consider our proposal and please do reply with your comments.

Sincerely,

Yiraisa Andujar

with

Julie M. Fagan, Ph.D.
References:
Letter to the editor:

Sent to The Daily Targum (Published on March 25th 2015)
http://www.dailytargum.com/article/2015/03/medical-supply-banks-needed-worldwide

Dear Editor,

My name is Yiraisa Andujar and I am a junior undergraduate student in the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences at Rutgers University. With the help of Dr. Fagan of Rutgers University I’m currently doing research in which students identify a problem in society and come up with a possible solution and ways to implement them while providing a community action. The problem I chose to try to solve is the lack of medical supplies for the use of controlling outbreaks of infectious diseases on a global scale. Please consider publishing my letter, see submission below and attached. If you have any questions you many contact me at this email XXXXXXXXX or by phone XXXXXXXX.

When people are struggling financially, it can be hard for them to obtain basic needed resources. Resources like food in particular can take up most of a struggling family’s weekly income. Thankfully there are food banks which provide free food for those in need. People just stop by and pick up what they need. Wouldn’t it be nice to have a medical supplies bank like we have food banks?

The world went through a struggle when Ebola became a global epidemic. One of the contributing factors to the Ebola outbreak was the lack of basic medical supplies many of the affected countries had. There are currently many nonprofit organizations that provide medical assistance to impoverished nations. However, they use the medical supplies they have to combat persistent infectious diseases such as malaria or AIDS. Because they are not prepared for worldwide epidemics of infectious diseases they don’t have sufficient amounts of medical supplies to combat the diseases they usually treat and an epidemic. The World health organization currently has emergencies services but they lack a medical supply bank that would aid any nation afflicted with an outbreak of an infectious disease with the potential of becoming a global epidemic. Though the World health Organization (WHO) has been criticized for its role in containing the spread of Ebola, its role is to identify potential increases of infectious diseases and to inform the governments of those countries of the potential dangers. Having to go into affected countries and to take care of a quickly spreading outbreak goes beyond the scope of WHO. A medical supply bank for emergencies, with multiple locations around the world, that works with WHO should be established. A medical supply bank would protect doctors because they are vulnerable to the diseases they treat if they lack the medical supplies that can protect them such as gloves, prevent further economic hardships to third world countries and would prevent a situation like the recent Ebola epidemic where the world was unprepared.

Sincerely,
Yiraisa Andujar
Letter to the editor:

Sent to New York Times

Dear Editor,

My name is Yiraisa Andujar and I am an undergraduate student in the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences at Rutgers University. After reading the article "One Year Later, Ebola Outbreak Offers Lessons for Next Epidemic" published on March 22, 2015, I was reminded of the research project I'm currently doing with the help of Dr. Fagan of Rutgers University. My project involves finding a solution for the lack of medical supplies in order to control outbreaks of infectious diseases on a global scale. Please consider my post below for publication in your newspaper. If you have any questions you may contact me at this email xxxxxxxxxxxx or by phone xxxxxxxxxx.

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