Testimony of the American Academy of Nursing

U.S. Government Response: Fighting Ebola and Protecting America
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Responding to the challenges of Ebola virus disease

Ebola virus disease is a devastating disease that has claimed thousands of lives, primarily in three countries in West Africa. Nurses and other health care workers in that region have acquired Ebola through contact with body fluids of infected persons. Concern in the U.S. about the risk of contracting Ebola has heightened following the news that two nurses in a Dallas hospital became infected while caring for a patient with the disease.

Nurses have a proud history of providing compassionate, quality care for patients with infectious diseases, and are at the front line of responding to the current Ebola virus disease outbreak. In this regard, both immediate and long term activities are required.

Clear communication, transparency, and evidence-based approaches are critical tools in combatting this disease. Clear, accurate, consistent and up-to-date information must be made readily available to health care workers and the general public about Ebola virus disease. This is vitally important because current practices and procedures will change as knowledge of the disease and its effective prevention and treatment continue to evolve.

Because nurses spend the greatest amount of time in direct contact with patients, they also face the greatest personal risk if appropriate protective measures and procedures are not employed. In carrying out their duty to care for patients, nurses must be able to practice in environments that prioritize safety – for their patients, their coworkers, and themselves. Nurses and other front-line health care workers must be provided with adequate personal protective equipment along with adequate hands-on training in how to use such equipment.

Nurses are the front line of surveillance—they are key to monitoring and detecting signs and symptoms of infection and initiating appropriate treatment and referral. Assuring that there are sufficient numbers of nurses in health care settings, communities, and public health agencies is critical to any efforts to prevent transmission of Ebola virus. Staffing decisions should take into account the demands posed by adherence to current protocols—for example, the extra time required to don and remove personal protective equipment and the need to do these with a trained observer present. In addition, prevention of disease transmission within health care settings must be addressed from a systems perspective, identifying gaps that lead to such transmission and how to remedy them.

It is crucial that we propose these immediate responses be accompanied by a long-range commitment to protecting the public's health from Ebola virus disease, as well as other emerging and reemerging infectious diseases. This includes ensuring an adequate public health infrastructure and providing education about potential disease threats, as well as necessary human resources for surveillance, contact tracing and rapid referral to appropriate treatment when necessary. These efforts will require adequate support for federal, state and local public health agencies in the U.S., and a commitment to strengthening public health resources globally. It also requires a continued commitment to developing effective treatments and vaccines, and to making these widely accessible.

Nurses must be involved in all levels of decision-making—from the point of care to the board room and at the federal, state and local levels--regarding the current response to Ebola virus disease as well as planning and preparing for outbreaks of other emerging and reemerging diseases. Nurses should also lead and implement research efforts to draw lessons from global and domestic experience with efforts to prevent and treat Ebola.

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