

NEWS

NHS staff readied to deal with Ebola cases in hospitals and general practices

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Preparations are being made for NHS staff to know how to deal with possible cases of people coming into hospital or general practices in England infected with the Ebola virus, MPs have been told.

NHS England has asked managers to confirm that steps are being taken to ensure that isolation rooms are available and that their staff know what to do should a person with the virus come into the hospital or practice, but staff are also expected to make sure they are well informed.

These reassurances were given by England's chief medical officer, Sally Davies, during an evidence session of the House of Commons Health Committee for its inquiry into the Ebola virus on 22 October.

Figures from the World Health Organization on 19 October showed that there have been 9936 cases of Ebola virus disease in the five countries with confirmed cases (Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Spain, and the United States) and two previously affected countries (Nigeria and Senegal) and that there have been 4877 deaths.

MPs on the Health Committee asked witnesses how well prepared NHS staff were to deal with cases. The committee's chair, Sarah Wollaston, Conservative MP for Totnes, said, "I have heard from a casualty doctor who didn't wish to identify the hospital that he was at, to say that he doesn't know where the personal protective equipment is and he hasn't been trained how to use it."

Davies said, "I am concerned [about whether] our staff know enough on how to do this so I have been in contact with NHS England and I am going to ask them to send you a note about the preparations. The national preparations are excellent and are now moving to try and make sure that all frontline staff, not just clinicians, but others too, are prepared as to what to do."

"The first response is, 'Hello, ah, if you may have Ebola, I would like you to sit in this room, here is a glass of water, and I am shutting the door while I call in some experts and we make sure we know what we do.'"

Having sought assurances from NHS England, Davies said, "It is very clear to me that a lot of work is going on. It is improving day by day. There is more work to be done."

Davies said that current government modelling indicated that the United Kingdom might see a "few cases" of Ebola over the next few months but that even in the worst case scenario the number would be "less than a handful."

NHS England had that same day sent a letter to every chief executive in the NHS with a checklist for assurance purposes and asking them to sign that off.

Davies said that staff had a responsibility too, adding, "I think we also need to get over to frontline staff that they have a personal responsibility to make sure that they find out where their PPE [personal protective equipment] is and they have learnt to do this."

MPs asked how adequate local processes were and how resilient and prepared were local public health authorities.

Paul Cosford, medical director and director for health protection at Public Health England, also giving evidence, said, "We have been running an assurance process through all PHE local services to make absolutely certain that at any time, day or night, the response system with identified instant leads is available and working properly."

thebmj.com Briefing: Ebola: how well is the UK prepared? (*BMJ* 2014;349:g6288, doi:10.1136/bmj.g6288)

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2014;349:g6449

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