LETTERS

EBOLA CRISIS

What stops healthcare workers volunteering to fight Ebola in west Africa?

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The outbreak of Ebola virus disease has caused unprecedented demands on health systems in west Africa, which were already fragile and are now at breaking point. The outbreak will be brought under control only with a massive input of money, infrastructure, and people.¹ Crucial among the personnel needed are healthcare workers. For example, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the most heavily involved charitable organisation, currently has only 276 international staff on the ground in the three worst affected countries—Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.² This is far short of the thousands more that are needed.³ So far, in the UK 800 people have volunteered to go to west Africa. Although many more have considered going, the factors that hold people back from signing up have not been assessed. Informal discussions among colleagues, and monitoring of social media such as Twitter and Facebook, have suggested that a range of factors may influence healthcare workers' decisions on going to west Africa. Some of these, such as fear of becoming infected or personal home circumstances, are not easily changed. But there are other factors, which potentially could be dealt with if it were clear that they are important. These might include reassurance about the training to be given, clarity over payment and backfill of posts, and allaying uncertainties over repatriation for anyone who becomes unwell.

To gain a better understanding of the barriers that are preventing UK healthcare workers from volunteering to help control the Ebola virus in west Africa, we have launched a simple, brief online survey. We hope that this will identify any modifiable barriers that policy makers and those recruiting staff could potentially address. This would encourage more healthcare workers to volunteer in west Africa, which should in turn help lead to a swifter end to the epidemic. Bringing the outbreak under control would not only benefit the people of west Africa but also help to protect the UK from imported cases. We encourage all UK healthcare workers to complete our survey, which can be found at www.surveymonkey.com/s/HPRUebola.

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- 1 Gulland A. Fifteen countries are at risk of Ebola outbreak, says WHO. *BMJ* 2014;349:g6305. (17 October.)
- 2 Médecins Sans Frontières. Ebola- MSF staff on the ground. www.doctorswithoutborders.org/our-work/medical-issues/ebola.
- 3 O'Carroll L. Hundreds of NHS medics volunteer to work in Sierra Leone as Ebola spreads. *Guardian* 2014. www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/17/nhs-medics-volunteer-sierra-leone-ebola-nursing-call-up.

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