

UCLA

limn

Title

Global Health Doesn't Exist

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/354792nf>

Journal

limn, 1(5)

Author

MacPhail, Theresa

Publication Date

2014-12-19

Copyright Information

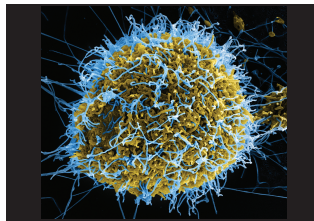
This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

IF THERE'S ONE THING that the continuing Ebola outbreak in West Africa should have taught us by now, it's this: global public health doesn't exist.

At least not in any type of substantial, material way that might have made our collective response to this devastating epidemic more effective at a far earlier stage in its development. Global health is more concept than concrete reality. What we think of as "global health" is an idea or an organizational model for an integrated international network of health professionals capable of responding to an outbreak of infectious disease anywhere, anytime. But as it currently exists, or at least as it is defined by the various institutions that embrace that label for their projects—a long list that includes everyone from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF; Doctors Without Borders)—global health remains more aspiration than actuality.

In the current Ebola crisis, the World Health Organization (WHO) is the symbolic figurehead of the global public health network. As such, it carried the brunt of the blame for the slow-paced international response to the outbreaks in West Africa. Initial cases in late March garnered a speedy response, with a whole host of international experts descending on the scene in Guinea and Liberia (including an large team from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control [CDC] Epidemiological Intelligence Service). But, experts argued, the international response did not adequately escalate in proportion to the threat the Ebola virus posed as the situation worsened. It took months for the WHO to issue a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC), a crucial action in terms of gathering the necessary increased resources, funding, and staff needed to combat the virus effectively. In this sense, "global" health seemed to fail in one of its key tasks.

GLOBAL HEALTH DOESN'T EXIST



Global health is like the viruses it claims to be combatting; Theresa MacPhail explains how.

The WHO, in many ways, is global health. The WHO exists to organize international resources, to be an information hub for all signatory members, to keep tabs on chronic and infectious diseases affecting health everywhere, and to alert member nations when a local outbreak threatens to spread internationally. It also sets international health standards, requires member nations to have actionable epidemic response plans, and advocates for health as a basic human right. As part of this mission, it rallies member nations around central goals for development and disease eradication. As a global institution, the WHO's fundamental mission is to promote health and equal access to health care no matter where individuals are located on the world map. But as an entity whose duty it is to stand vigilant against the spread of infectious diseases around the globe, the WHO is not even half as big as it would need to be to do the job on its own. It simply doesn't have the materials to do so.

Global public health is much like a virus. Like the viruses it helps to eradicate and control, global health cannot survive outside of a healthy "host." The global health network requires the existence of effective local and national public health agencies to function at all. And this "global" network only pulses into material being during large-scale, widespread events such as an influenza pandemic or the current Ebola crisis. The remainder of the time, during more routine outbreaks, it exists in a state of perpetual readiness and watchfulness. Most of the time, the global health network is in a dormant state.

In other words, global health is as viral as the microbes it is called on to battle. ■

THERESA MACPHAIL is an Assistant Professor at Stevens Institute of Technology and the author of *The Viral Network: A Pathography of the H1N1 Influenza Pandemic*.

VIRUS

GLOBAL HEALTH

Needs a host cell	○.....○	Needs a host institution
Cannot function alone	○.....○	Cannot function without the local
Mutates to survive	○.....○	Mutates to expand
Swaps info (gene segments) inside host	○.....○	Shares info (expertise) inside hosts