

The politics of fear: médecins sans frontières and the West African ebola epidemic

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Abstrak

Although Ebola and similar hemorrhagic fevers have occurred in the past, both the numbers and geographic spread of the 2014-15 West African Ebola epidemic were unprecedented. Ebola and the associated risks drove an improvised, sometimes ineffective, response from political and medical authorities. Fear, rather than rational planning, drove many decisions made at population and leadership levels. Institutions, practices, economies, and governments were all deeply affected by the demands engendered by this emergency. Ultimately, the epidemic revealed serious fault lines at all levels in the theories and practices of global public health. Doctors Without Borders/Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), as the major provider of medical care to the afflicted, was deeply entangled in many of these issues. From difficult choices made for the care of individual patients to the impact of Ebola on entire health systems, the common thread in each chapter is how fear influenced the political and medical response. Using materials from the MSF archives, this book explores this theme in ten chapters and four eyewitness vignettes. The book examines the epidemic from the perspectives of a wide range of actors from distinct sectors, including a bioethicist, a political scientist, a historian, clinical doctors, policymakers, and anthropologists.