Cautions on Ebola, Medical and Ethical
Tough Decisions For Health Professionals Serving in Outbreak Areas

By Al Bravo, Associate Director, Public Affairs, ANSC Phoenix Campus

David Beyda, MD, has been in the trenches, treating patients around the world. So it is easy to believe when he says health professionals face a moral dilemma when asked to help in an outbreak such as the one occurring in western Africa.

"Being a physician or a nurse caring for those patients with Ebola, knowing that they may, with one tip of a glove, that they may get it, and now they have compromised themselves and they've compromised their families," said Dr. Beyda, chairman of the Department of Bioethics and Medical Humanism at the University of Arizona College of Medicine – Phoenix. "It's an extremely difficult ethical decision that we as physicians and nurses face on a daily basis when we are asked to care for those who have an infectious disease."

"We often struggle with this issue of duty to others and duty to ourselves," Dr. Beyda said. "Being responsible and obligated to care for those who come to us for help, and face overseas. In addition, in Africa, distrust and long-held traditions have been an obstacle in controlling the Ebola outbreak.

"Living in Africa, a very different culture, it's a different environment, it's a different climate," he said. "It's being in an environment that is completely foreign to those who have never been outside their own community here in the United States. It represents an opportunity for us to really become familiar with others. It's a very different place. You are surrounded by those who have a different view of life, and who have a different way of life, they may have nothing, living in small villages. They are nomadic, maybe moving from one village to another."

Dr. Beyda has been on more than 40 trips to 15 different countries. He began working with third-world nations as a teenager and at age 27, while still in his pediatric residency, he experienced his first formal medical mission. That kind of background can prepare you to face the troubling events in an epidemic as the present Ebola outbreak has become. But with a family and other concerns, jumping on a plane to serve isn't as cut and dry.

"I would do it, but I would need some significant precautions in place," he said.

That was one of Dr. Beyda's concerns at the outset of this latest outbreak – the differences in health care landscape.

"The conditions in Africa are a little bit more primitive," he said. "They don't have all the facilities that we have here in the United States. Protection mechanisms are a little different, they don't have major isolation rooms like would we have in a hospital, with different types of air flows, that type of thing. So it really is open air contact precautions. So it is really different environment. It's an environment that we, as health-care providers, physicians, nurses, etc., accept that there is danger when we are there dealing with situations like this."

Earlier in his career, Dr. Beyda said he wouldn't hesitate to go to a hot spot but today is different.

"Now, I think it would be a different decision I would make," Dr. Beyda said. "I still go to crazy places but it takes a little more thought and preparation. So I have a lot more things in place now before I leave."

He also noted that until his outbreak, Americans haven't paid much attention to a disease like Ebola.

"We have a tendency to not think about issues until we face them, and this is one of those, although Ebola has been much more of an issue in Africa, sometimes we are just not aware of what's going on around us until it hits us in the face," AM

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