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Ebola action is needed before it's too late

Sir, Large cruise ships should be commandeered immediately and sent to West Africa as floating hospital ships. I make this suggestion drawing on my experience on the Falklands task force commander's staff, mobilising merchantmen as troop transports and hospital ships.

Cruise ships are fast through the water, have sophisticated air conditioning systems, catering facilities and huge electrical generating capacity: there would never be a shortage of power for any medical need. Cruise ships also have helipads and sophisticated communications systems.

This environment could be used to give medical personnel the greatest possible protection (clean rooms, suiting rooms and so on). Each of the big ships could offer up to 3,000 hospital beds.

There are no other capital assets that can put so many beds, and such a sophisticated Western technological infrastructure, in place in west Africa in such a short time.

These ships are very expensive (and no-one is going to want to use them afterwards) but they are far cheaper than military assets with the same facilities.

At about €500 million to build, these ships may be expensive, but it monetises the problem. An investment of €5 billion could put ten ships and 20,000 good medical beds into west Africa within a month. This is just about sufficient to make a difference. I can see no other means.

NICHOLAS R MESSINGER
Master mariner, Sturminster Newton, Dorset

Sir, I warned in my book in 2008 of the danger of diseases bred in insanitary conditions in the developing world being spread internationally; I mentioned ebola, together with Sars and HIV/Aids



Burden of proof

Sir, I must respond to the claim (letter, Oct 14) that Andrew Lansley acted foolishly by changing the 1992 Conservative manifesto at the printers. The Cabinet had approved the text, but in the event, what was sent to the printers was riddled with mistakes, repetition and inconsistencies of structure. All that Andrew and I (as his deputy) did was put right such glaring errors.

MARTIN GRAHAM
Birmingham

Expel poor debate

Sir, It is a pity royal commissions are out of fashion. If ever an issue deserved the analysis of such a body it is immigration. The debate ("Migrant benefits", leader, Oct 15) is based on differing perceptions and on prejudice. A respected and widely drawn body could produce an authoritative assessment. That would surely offer the public a strong basis for considering the policy options.

OWEN REES
Cyncoed, Cardiff

Inheritance tax

Sir, David Cameron could fulfil his promise to scrap inheritance tax on estates under £1 million (News, Oct 15), by allowing amounts up to this limit to be transferred tax-free to beneficiaries' pension funds. The cost of this change would be low, as beneficiaries would be less inclined to make their own future pension contributions and thus they would

only solution to that is to quarantine all visitors from West Africa for two weeks. Unless such rigour is applied, ebola will quite probably have devastating consequences here.

May I now suggest two measures to improve the safety of those nursing the sufferers? One is the judicious use of carbolic aerosol-type sprays as first used by Lord Lister. At one time, I had to perform orthopaedic operations in a room subjected to heavy traffic. By spraying this room there were no post-operative infections.

The second is the use of copper-impregnated materials, which have proved to be bactericidal. Gowns thus treated could be reused. This could help to overcome one of the serious dangers of nursing these patients: that of becoming infected when removing gowns.

WYLLIE GIBBS, FRCS
Newport, Isle of Wight

Sir, Jenni Russell ("Action this day if we're going to beat ebola," Oct 16) omits an important factor with respect to certain west African governments. The apparent inertia is less likely to be caused by crowd psychology than by a reasonable expectation that the governments of Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone should have been making reasonable attempts to isolate affected patients and their contacts, prohibit cross-border travel and communicate effectively the seriousness of the outbreak.

DR TONY MALES
Cambridge

Sir, Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* recounts how market traders, fearful of infection from coins, required customers to place payment in, and take change from, bowls of vinegar.

Should not government guidance suggest that retailers display notices stating "We encourage the use of contactless payment in the hope that this will reduce the risk of infection by

and to impose 21 days' quarantine on those few who are allowed to leave, preferably before departure. If an infected individual boards a ship for a slow journey home, the result will be a disaster. The Royal Fleet Auxiliary ship going to Sierra Leone would do well to isolate any person who goes ashore.

Even trained staff with all the protective gear find it difficult to protect themselves from infection. Therefore, those who have been involved in this dangerous task should also be quarantined for three weeks after their exposure. This would have prevented the present panic in America. We have forgotten how important enforced isolation is in the control of infectious disease. Harsh decisions can limit the spread of this tragedy.

MARIAN LATCHMAN
Braishfield, Hants

Sir, Where is the international ebola aid movement — the international charity appeals and pop concerts? ebola seems to have a low profile in Europe. This needs all our help now, or it will get exponentially worse. For one will be making another donation to help combat this awful disease — not much, but it all helps. Have you done your bit?

PAT O'HARA
Ormskirk, Lancs

Sir, I was appalled to read that those service personnel deploying to West Africa to help in the WHO efforts to contain the ebola virus, would not "routinely" be flown home by the government, should they be unfortunate enough to become infected. Does this stand up against the armed forces covenant? And what message does this send to those going to west Africa to assist in this great effort?

NICK BAILEY
Upton Lovell, Wiltshire

Sir, A seemingly unrecognised route for spread of ebola would be rats