

BBC RADIO WALES

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Oliver Hides (OH) interviewing Professor David Southall (DS)

OH David Cameron will chair a meeting of the emergency committee, COBRA, today to discuss the spread of Ebola. Three people remain in quarantine in Madrid after a Spanish nurse there tested positive for the disease after treating two infected men. It's the first known case of Ebola to be contracted outside West Africa.

Prof David Southall is Honorary Medical Director of Maternal & Childhheath Advocacy International and has just got back from Liberia. Good morning.

DS Good Morning

OH First of all just tell us what you saw in Liberia? What is the scale of this now?

DS It is pretty devastating. There are people turning up at treatment units and being turned away and then infecting more of the local population. It's out of control. The real problem is staff – the healthcare staff within West Africa in Liberia in particular. There are so few left. Those that are trying to run the hospitals are really small numbers and there are very few available to run the emergency treatment units for Ebola. We know that there are some...

OH They are incredibly brave aren't they? The people who choose to go to these areas during an outbreak and do what they can to help but it's clear from what you say that there aren't enough of those people and I should imagine that when people like this Spanish nurse return... or at least it was the Spanish missionary who'd returned ... with Ebola, few will be inclined to go and help out. So what is the solution?

DS Well, we don't know what the solution is, but we are offering some possibilities. We know that this virus can be prevented in its transmission. It's not airborne. But isolation hospitals are needed. Now that means they've got to be able to provide good treatment and be isolated from the community in which they are based. Now in West Africa this is really difficult to do, and I know that the Americans are planning to build some field hospitals in Liberia, and the British government is doing a really important project in Sierra Leone to set up a hospital there for Ebola victims. But the numbers now are so great that they are not going to be able to cope with this and therefore we have to think of some alternatives.

And the alternative we're suggesting - for discussion only, because it requires so much discussion - is the possibility of medically evacuating patients to isolation hospitals which are absolutely 100% protected. Not like the hospital in Madrid, which treats all sorts of other cases, normal hospital problems. We think that hospitals should be set up in well-resourced countries that are secure – 100% secure

– and provide proper treatment for the poor people in West Africa who are dying day in and day out in large numbers.

- OH Right, let's be clear, you are suggesting - and as you say putting this on the table as a discussion point - but suggesting that maybe planeloads of people suffering from Ebola might be brought into Britain and put into isolation hospitals here?
- DS Not just Britain – the whole of the well-resourced world. Because Britain is already doing a massive amount by trying to set up in Sierra Leone. Also MSF has been doing a lot of work – Medecins Sans Frontieres – in Liberia and Sierra Leone, British workers. What I'm saying is this isn't enough now because it's got out of control. And it would not be impractical if it was done properly and safe as well, to set these up in well-resourced countries.
- OH I struggle to see how a) there would be the political will to do this, and b) how the public would accept it. But also what it would look like – where the hospitals would be, how the people would get into the country?
- DS Very interesting project in York at the moment, where 22 Field Hospital have set up a hangar where they are training to look after health workers in Sierra Leone. And if you look at those pictures, you'll see that that's exactly how an isolation hospital could be set up within days.
- OH So you're talking about converting hangars at RAF bases where there's ... or a former RAF base, or whatever, so there's no public traffic, the risk of contamination in that spot is very very low. Is this the sort of thing you're talking about?
- DS Yes it is. And also the transfer has to be done in a very careful manner so that the planes that are taking the patients – obviously accompanied by well protected health workers – are safe too that they are not going to be contaminated or contaminate other people.
- OH OK. We'll stop it there. It's a very interesting idea. We'll see what people make of that. Thank you very much Professor David Southall from Maternal & Childhealth Advocacy International.