

Stop calling me 'the Ebola nurse'

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I never had Ebola, and politicians who lie do nothing to protect your health

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I never had Ebola. I never had symptoms of Ebola. I tested negative for Ebola the first night I stayed in New Jersey governor Chris Christie's private prison in Newark. I am now past the incubation period - meaning that I will not develop symptoms of Ebola.

I never had Ebola, so please stop calling me “the Ebola Nurse” - now!

This is what did happen: I was quarantined against my will by overzealous politicians after I volunteered to go and treat people affected by Ebola in west Africa. My liberty, my interests and consequently my civil rights were ignored because some ambitious governors saw an opportunity to use an age-old political tactic: fear. Christie and my governor in Maine, Paul LePage, decided to disregard medical science and the constitution in hopes of advancing their careers. They bet that, by multiplying the existing fear and misinformation about Ebola - a disease most Americans know little about - they could ultimately manipulate everyone and proclaim themselves the protectors of the people by “protecting” the public from a disease that hasn't killed a single American. Politicians who tell lies such as “she is obviously ill” and mistreat citizens by telling them to “sit down and shut up” will hopefully never make it to the White House.

Here's my good news: the unconstitutionality of forcing asymptomatic healthcare workers into in-home quarantine was determined by due process of law, and a courageous and insightful judge agreed with science and public health law. You cannot - in Maine, at least - quarantine me in the off chance that I might one day become ill with a contagious disease.

But the disregard for reason didn't stop with me. Too many political and civic leaders have allowed this fear to spread and some even fueled the flames. My partner, who supported me and has trusted medical science throughout our ordeal, was banned from his university campus when I returned from West Africa - from the campus of a nursing school, no less! A teacher in Louisville, Kentucky, went on a mission trip to Kenya - which has not had a single Ebola case - and was asked to stay home from work for three weeks when she returned. And maybe most detrimental of all, because of the quarantine policy in the state of Louisiana, healthy medical workers who were fighting Ebola in West Africa were forced to cancel their attendance at the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene's annual conference this year - interfering with the legitimate expansion of knowledge to help combat the disease, thanks only to illegitimate fear.

This is disheartening: Even with just 10 total patients treated for Ebola in this country and no transmission from a medical aid worker to another person on US soil, politicians are still escalating anxieties and giving the public permission to discriminate, stigmatize and even hate aid workers like me. By doing so, they are not just limiting the help Americans can give to people suffering from Ebola - American politicians are actively limiting the world's understanding of a disease so many people fear.

Like many aid workers, I went to West Africa to respond to the Ebola outbreak because it was the most essential struggle about which I knew I could do something. I spent four of the most difficult weeks of my life fighting against a disease that destroys people of all ages and physical strengths. I witnessed men, women and children - who days earlier were strong and full of life - struggle to hold a glass of water to their lips. I worked in an Ebola case management center where our beds were constantly filled and so many others suffering from Ebola in West Africa needed help, but the capacity was lacking; we need many more people to go and help.

Like me, most workers who return from helping to care for Ebola patients will thankfully never develop symptoms of Ebola, and US policy needs to reflect that truth rather than stoke fears that someone *could* get sick. I was impressed when I read the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control's technical report on the public health management of aid workers returning from Ebola-affected areas, which gave clear, concise and evidence-based guidelines for all of Europe that should be emulated everywhere.

Workers returning from West Africa must be supported - and the first step of that support process is to make sure that evidence-based policies are developed and implemented by public health officials so that aid workers get the monitoring and care they need and the public are simultaneously protected. No one should be victimized by being placed in a quarantine if they do not have any symptoms of Ebola, because asymptomatic people are not a health risk.

I want to live in a country that understands Ebola. I want to live in a world that cares about those dying from this terrible disease in West Africa. Nobody should've had to watch me ride my bicycle out in the open as politicians fed the public false fears and misinformation. I want to live in an America that reaches out to aid workers as they return from West Africa and says, "We loved and stood by you when you were fighting this disease. We will love and stand by you now."

We can define compassion, instead of being ruled by fear and fear-mongers.

Compassion means responding to this outbreak instead of ignoring it; it means fighting our own irrational fears and learning more about Ebola and the people who are battling it. True compassion means showing politicians that we will not allow them to divide our communities and pit us against one another. They can either help to unite us, or we will unite ourselves.

Politicians get to enact laws, but they should not make public health policy without the input of the scientific community. I, for one very healthy example, hope that humanity, science and compassion will overcome fear so that we can conquer Ebola. It can be done. It must be done.

Norman Siegel and Steve Hyman contributed to this article.

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