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The epidemic of Ebola haemorrhagic fever in Sudan and Zaire, 1976: introductory note

P. BRÈS [1]

In September 1976, there was an outbreak of disease in the southern part of Sudan that was first thought to be typhoid fever. This diagnosis was not confirmed by the laboratory in Khartoum and it became evident that it might, in fact, be one of the viral haemorrhagic fevers. The World Health Organization was requested to help identify the virus. The disease was severe, with diarrhoeal and haemorrhagic symptoms; the case fatality rate was high and a large number of cases were among the staff of Maridi hospital. The first hypothesis was that it could have been yellow fever, Lassa fever, Congo-Crimean haemorrhagic fever, or Marburg disease, all of which were known to be present in Africa. Material collected by Sudanese epidemiologists was sent to a high-security laboratory in the United Kingdom and another in the United States of America. Simultaneously, a similar outbreak was notified in northern Zaire, at about 1000 km from the focus in Sudan. Specimens from patients in Zaire were sent to the Prince Leopold Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp. Less than two weeks later, in all three laboratories, the virus was found to resemble Marburg virus under the electron microscope (*1*, *2*, *3*), but the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, USA, soon found that the new virus, called Ebola, was antigenically different.

WHO sent a team to the Sudan to investigate the disease together with national epidemiologists, and to carry out appropriate measures. An International Commission was set up in Zaire with the same objectives. The two following papers describe the work of these teams. The solidarity and the devotion which inspired the members of the teams is reflected in their desire to present these papers as a collective effort. The spirit which animated everyone concerned is a comforting example of international cooperation.

[1] Chief, Virus Diseases, World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland.

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