

The Role of Community Beliefs and Practices on the Spread of Ebola in Uganda, September 2022

Authors : Helen Nelly Naiga, Jane Frances Zalwango, Saudah N. Kizito, Brian Agaba, Brenda N Simbwa, Maria Goretti Zalwango, Richard Migisha, Benon Kwesiga, Daniel Kadobera, Alex Ario Riolexus, Sarah Paige, Julie R. Harris

Abstract : Background: Traditional community beliefs and practices can facilitate the spread of Ebola virus during outbreaks. On September 20, 2022, Uganda declared a Sudan Virus Disease (SVD) outbreak after a case was confirmed in Mubende District. During September-November 2022, the outbreak spread to eight additional districts. We investigated the role of community beliefs and practices in the spread of SUDV in Uganda in 2022. Methods: A qualitative study was conducted in Mubende, Kassanda, and Kyegegwa districts in February 2023. We conducted nine focus group discussions (FGDs) and six key informant interviews (KIIs). FGDs included SVD survivors, household members of SVD patients, traditional healers, religious leaders, and community leaders. Key informants included community, political, and religious leaders, traditional healers, and health workers. We asked about community beliefs and practices to understand if and how they contributed to the spread of SUDV. Interviews were recorded, translated, transcribed, and analyzed thematically. Results: Frequently-reported themes included beliefs that the community deaths, later found to be due to SVD, were the result of witchcraft or poisoning. Key informants reported that SVD patients frequently first consulted traditional healers or spiritual leaders before seeking formal healthcare, and noted that traditional healers treated patients with signs and symptoms of SVD without protective measures. Additional themes included religious leaders conducting laying-on-of-hands prayers for SVD patients and symptomatic contacts, SVD patients and their symptomatic contacts hiding in friends' homes, and exhumation of SVD patients originally buried in safe and dignified burials, to enable traditional burials. Conclusion: Multiple community beliefs and practices likely promoted SVD outbreak spread during the 2022 outbreak in Uganda. Engaging traditional and spiritual healers early during similar outbreaks through risk communication and community engagement efforts could facilitate outbreak control. Targeted community messaging, including clear biological explanations for clusters of deaths and information on the dangers of exhuming bodies of SVD patients, could similarly facilitate improved control in future outbreaks in Uganda.

Keywords : Ebola, Sudan virus, outbreak, beliefs, traditional

Conference Title : ICIDE 2024 : International Conference on Infectious Disease Epidemiology

Conference Location : Toronto, Canada

Conference Dates : June 13-14, 2024