News

AP Investigation: American Company Bungled Ebola Response

Metabiota misread epidemic, contributed to botched lab results that put people at risk of infection

AP PHOTO/TANYA BINDRA, FILE

In this Sept. 24, 2014, file photo, a health worker sprays a colleague with disinfectant after working inside a morgue with people suspected of dying from the Ebola virus, in Kenema, eastern Sierra Leone.

Raphael Satter and Maria Cheng
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A U.S. company assigned a crucial role in the efforts to battle Ebola in Sierra Leone made a series of costly mistakes during the 2014 outbreak, an Associated Press investigation has found.

Staffers with the San Francisco-based company Metabiota Inc. not only misread the epidemic, they contributed to botched lab results, undermined partners and put people at risk of the terrifying virus, according to leaked documents and interviews with international health responders.

The company had been tapped by the World Health Organization and the Sierra Leonean government to help fight Ebola. But internal emails from WHO and other international health agencies obtained by AP show that senior scientists were alarmed at a spate of problems in a lab shared by Metabiota and Tulane University.

"This is a situation that WHO can no longer endorse," WHO outbreak expert Dr. Eric Bertherat wrote in a July 17, 2014, email to colleagues.

Bertherat relayed reports of "total confusion" in the government lab split between Metabiota and Tulane at the Kenema hospital in Sierra Leone, noting there was "no tracking of the samples" and "absolutely no control on what is being done."

He said the flubbed results were particularly dangerous given suspicion among the local population that international workers were spreading Ebola deliberately.

Lawrence Gostin, director of WHO's Collaborating Center on Public Health Law and Human Rights at Georgetown University, said it was inexcusable that a company without the required expertise to respond to an outbreak was given such fundamental responsibilities.

"It was a comedy of errors," he said, adding that WHO was ultimately to blame for allowing the situation to unravel.

"WHO knew that this company was bungling the response and they did nothing," Gostin said. "In any other context, that would be called a cover-up."

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WHO officials did not return messages seeking comment on the AP story.

Metabiota's chief executive officer and founder, Nathan Wolfe, said there was no evidence that his company was responsible for the lab blunders.

He added that the reported squabbles were overblown and that any predictions made by his employees who were on loan to the Sierra Leonean government didn't reflect the company's position.

Metabiota doesn't specialize in outbreak response, he said, but volunteered its staff and resources to Sierra Leone at a cost to his company of about $500,000.

"We are incredibly proud about everything they did," he said at an interview in his office Thursday.

"These are individuals who took substantial personal risk and worked incredibly long hours."

Metabiota bills itself as a pioneer in tracking emerging viral threats and says it works to "improve the world's resilience to epidemics."

The firm and its nonprofit sister company, Global Viral, have received millions from the U.S. Department of Defense, USAID, Google and the California-based Skoll Foundation.

In the early months of the 2014 Ebola outbreak, with WHO and partners thin on the ground, authorities in Sierra Leone turned to Metabiota to help respond to the epidemic in Kenema.

The company had been in the country since 2009 and supported the government on issues including outbreak investigation and laboratory work.

At first, Metabiota appeared to be doing well. But within weeks, the virus spread across the country and, as the death toll mounted, experts began questioning the work being done at the lab in Kenema shared by Metabiota and Tulane, which had its own longstanding project researching Lassa fever and other diseases.