

Colorado armed with facts on Ebola

By Larry Wolk, M.D., executive director and chief medical officer for the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment

The Ebola "crisis" has tested public health officials, politicians and pundits alike. Recommended guidelines and responses around the country have varied greatly, changing almost by the minute. Too often, it seems, decisions have been motivated by fear, rather than by the facts.

As the head of public and environmental health for the state, I am responsible for ensuring that every Coloradan is protected from threats to our health and to our environmental quality. I am a doctor, which means all of my training and instinct is rooted in science and facts, and responding accordingly.

This pragmatic commitment to readiness is especially constructive when it comes to the Ebola virus.

Some basic facts: Ebola is not spread through the air, water or food. An infected person cannot spread the disease until symptoms appear. This incubation period ranges from two to 21 days. Symptoms include fever, severe headache, muscle pain, vomiting, diarrhea, stomach pain, or unexplained bleeding or bruising.

Ebola is not easily spread. The virus can be contracted only through direct contact through broken skin or through the eyes, nose or mouth. Finally, it is important to note that a Coloradan has a greater chance of being hit by lightning or winning the lottery than contracting the Ebola virus, and there are no Ebola cases in Colorado. Still, I am confident in the steps we have taken and the protocols we have in place for a swift response.

We activated our statewide network of health care agencies, providers and hospitals to ensure they have the information and resources needed to spot and stop the virus, as well as keep our health care workers safe. We assembled a 24/7 mobilization team of medical and infectious-disease experts prepared to respond immediately to isolate, manage and treat any possible cases. We've also convened the Governor's Expert Emergency Epidemic Response Committee to keep real-time oversight and coordination of the virus.

Collaboration and communication has been and will remain a centerpiece of our preparedness. The state has fortified a strong network among public health (local and state), hospitals (through the Colorado Hospital Association), physicians (through the Colorado Medical Society) and nurses (through the Colorado Nurses Association). The state has been quick to respond to the general public's questions and concerns, with telephone, social media and Web-based resources and information.

And the state has developed detailed resources and plans, including a plan of response that not only considers contacts and health care personnel but also first responders, school personnel, coroners and waste streams (like hazardous waste disposal).

Our focus has and will continue to be on protecting the public's health while also ensuring that treatment for patients can be provided safely and appropriately. It is easy to get caught up in unwarranted fear and overreact. I was appalled at the mandatory quarantine orders recently issued by New York and New Jersey.

As the facts and fiction of Ebola evolves, be assured our public health community is ready.