

Ebola Is Just The Tip of an Iceberg.
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The news is full of the latest version of an old demon facing humanity: plagues and epidemics. Ebola is a dreadful disease that has crossed over from the ape family and has gone from an infrequent village killer to reaching some overpopulated urban areas and is currently incurable.

As always, the three-minute news bite misses the bigger picture, one with historic roots. The big picture has some unpleasant truths:

? Origin. Almost all endemic diseases affecting human beings are crossovers from the animal kingdom. Some, in very ancient times, came from eating the wrong things: bats, monkey brains, and other humans. Such practices, while rare today, still result in horrific deaths of the practitioners.

With the agricultural revolution and the domestication of animals for food, other diseases crossed over to human beings, initially deadly. Measles, influenza, and smallpox crossed over from pigs and cattle. When first introduced, the death toll could reach half the population, but as successive plagues followed, more humans developed immunity. Measles, for example, wiped out half of Rome at first, but eventually became a disease of childhood.

? Incubators. Most killer plagues had their origins in hot, humid climates, but also required carriers: merchants and armies. South China and India have been the major incubators for new crossover diseases (today bird flu), where they were carried by ship and caravan across Asia to Europe. The Black Death (Bubonic Plague) was one of these travelers that came in waves, over and over again, reducing the entire population of Eurasia by half. Cholera and Typhoid were killers well into the 20th century.

Other incubators are tropical Africa and the Amazon basin. Africa has by far given rise to the worst modern tropical diseases: Malaria, Yellow Fever, and Cholera. Syphilis was a minor disease in the New World, but when taken back by the Spaniards to Europe, it morphed into a virulent epidemic and when taken back to the New World, it killed many, as did smallpox.

? Practices. Ignorance breeds deadly consequences. AIDS was a crossover disease from eating monkey brains, and although those primates had a minor version of this disease (the same for Ebola), the version that reached human beings was deadly. We in the West learned that unsafe homosexual practices turned AIDS deadly for men. In Africa, moreover, promiscuous male sexuality included sex with both men and women, resulting in this plague's deadly effect on women, who died because of their husbands' irresponsibility.

? Cultural practices. The endemic abuse of women in most African culture has resulted in two horrors: AIDS-infected women thrown out of their homes to die in the streets and the widespread notion that raping a virgin child could cure the disease. Many diseases are attributed to witchcraft with annual slaughters of old women.

? Why West Africa. We hear much about the poverty of West African countries but rarely hear the reasons for poverty. Lack of education, ignorant practices, gross overpopulation, and distrust of governance all play a role. When mobs attack aid-workers treating Ebola victims, when people do not grasp the concept of viruses and bacteria (because they are invisible and must be a plot of the West), and when they stubbornly resist changing their customs of handling the dead, it is no wonder that they suffer. And when populations double and triple, competing and closing in on wildlife, crossover diseases will continue to decimate them. Unfortunately, travelers can bring them out of Africa.

? Dangers In Modern World. Our own trendy and casual sexual practices are bringing back diseases not seen since the Middle Ages. Oral sex performed on a man risks throat chlamydia and throat gonorrhea (25-30%); receiving oral sex (male) risks chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, and syphilis. Anal sex, both insertive and receptive, risks scabies and hepatitis. Anything goes is not a good idea. The 500 million people aged 15-49 infected with untreated sexually transmitted diseases each year

around the world should worry (World Health Organization). Stupid practices can spawn new and more virulent diseases.

If we do not educate and reduce the human population, nature will do it for us.

677 words

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