

DISEASE DETECTIVES COME TOGETHER IN GUINEA

Alaine Knipes arrived in Guinea just days after the country was declared Ebola free. She immediately boarded a UN flight from Conakry to join Dr. Gauthier Mubenga in the far-flung town of N'Zérékore. As the only two CDC staff in the Forest Region, they quickly forged a close relationship. It would take their combined expertise to tackle the job ahead.

The two were providing technical assistance to the Guinea Ministry of Health, with a focus on piloting a rapid, point-of-care diagnostic test for Ebola. A reliable test that can be done quickly and with few resources could be a game changer, although barriers remain.

EIS MEETS FETP

Alaine is an officer with CDC's Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) who is training with the Emergency Response and Recovery Branch. EIS has trained and deployed disease detectives to address the world's most urgent health crises since 1951. The global counterpart to EIS is the Field Epidemiology Training Program (FETP). During her deployment to Guinea, Alaine worked alongside two graduates from the Democratic Republic of the Congo's FETP: Gauthier and, later, his colleague Jacques Likofata.

Alaine focused on providing refresher trainings for laboratorians on properly using the new test, drawing from her experiences with other point-of-care tests in Haiti and India. Gauthier and Jacques also worked closely with WHO field teams and other partners on community outreach.

Both Gauthier and Jacques had previously deployed from DRC for the Ebola response in Guinea. Their background gave them insight into the culture as they worked on challenges surrounding burial practices, risk, and the need for continued surveillance at a time when the country had been declared free of the virus.

COMMITTED COLLEAGUES

This third phase of the pilot program included one hospital in each of the five prefectures that border Liberia. Alaine and her FETP colleagues traveled together every day, sometimes six hours to a single hospital, and she prizes the close connection they made. Alaine keeps in regular touch with Jacques, whose deployment has been extended due to new cases being discovered.

She tells him to get some rest.

"I'm sad that Guinea has new cases now," Alaine says of the situation, "but confident they can stop it. Our colleagues in the Forest Region are a very capable and committed group."

When asked what valuable lessons she took from her deployment to Guinea, Alaine responds thoughtfully: "Patience and flexibility." She laughs, then adds, "And how to wash clothes in a bucket."



Photo: FETP resident Gauthier Mubenga reviewing data collection forms with laboratorians at the Yomou prefectural hospital in N'Zérékoré region of Guinea



Ebola is a slippery nemesis – it takes dedicated people working together to keep it at bay. There is no better example of this than the recent partnership between disease detectives keeping watch for the virus in the remote Forest Region of Guinea.