

Protecting workers from fatal disease: The Emory/Ebola story

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“I need you to come to my office right now. We’re going to be receiving the first Ebola patient in the U.S., and you and I have to come up with protocols to keep our workers safe. The patient will be here tomorrow.”

Imagine getting that phone call one day on your way to work, at 7 a.m. from your boss. It actually happened to Emily Beck.

Beck, Clinical Lead Nurse Practitioner for Occupational Injury Management at Emory University Healthcare in Atlanta, says she’ll never forget that day — Aug. 1, 2014.

Almost immediately Emory went from treating one to treating two patients with Ebola, and by the end of the year, the unit successfully treated four patients with Ebola – and not one of Emory’s healthcare workers came down with the deadly disease.

Beck and Sharon Vanairsdale, Program Director of Emory’s Serious Communicable Disease Unit (SCDU), explained how they did it in a presentation at the [annual conference](#) of the Association of Occupational Health Professionals in Healthcare ([AOHP](#)) in San Francisco.

Lots of Emory’s protocols were specific to hospitals. But underneath it all were core occupational safety and health principles that are applicable to any workplace.

Shared accountability

Here are keys to Emory’s successful protection of its employees:

- **Culture of safety:** When it came to safety, rank was abolished. Anyone could call out anyone else for an unsafe practice. Safety wasn’t the job of just one or two people. Everyone shared accountability for it.
- **Communication:** Beck and Vanairsdale say effective and assertive communication was central to the safety of the team treating the Ebola patients. They held team huddles every day at 7:15 a.m., and everyone was expected to attend no matter what shift they worked. All accidents and near misses were to be reported.
- **SOPs:** The Emory Ebola team created what they called “Family Rules.” The most important rules were to follow all standard operating procedures to the best of their ability, and ensure that others followed the SOPs.
- **Training:** No one entered the rooms with the Ebola patients without mandatory training and demonstrated competence in the SOPs. Training included orientation, ongoing education and refresher sessions.
- **PPE:** Staff reported to the unit 15-30 minutes before their scheduled shifts, depending on the level of PPE they were required to wear. Strict PPE donning and doffing procedures were put into place and followed.
- **Health screenings:** Comprehensive health screenings were performed before employees worked in the SCDU. Potential health risks were identified, resulting in some people not being able to work in the SCDU despite their interest in doing so. The screenings included providing a comprehensive personal health history.

Emory is now providing [guidance](#) on handling patients with communicable, deadly diseases to other healthcare institutions.