



Burials in times of Ebola: Dos and Don'ts - issues of acceptability

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Introductory remarks:

- 1) Burials in times of Ebola or Marburg outbreaks have to follow strict biosafety rules to avoid transmission of Ebola/Marburg virus. At the same time, they should be acceptable to families and communities to avoid resistance against disease control. This document deals predominantly with acceptability issues.
- 2) It is not the purpose of this document to describe and analyse underlying beliefs and cultural practices. It is meant to quickly summarise our experiences from past and current Ebola and Marburg outbreaks in DR Congo, Uganda, Angola and Guinea. More systematic and comparative anthropological work is warranted.
- 3) Once a minimum of mutual trust has been established, many of the details below should be negotiated between response team, family members and community representatives, allowing for cultural needs without compromising biosafety. Successful negotiations will strengthen and deepen trust and cooperation.

Dos

RECRUITING MEMBERS OF BURIAL TEAM

- Make sure members of the burial team speak the local language, respect local people and their customs, and understand the importance of behaving in a reassuring and comforting way.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE BODY

- Allow the family to identify the body before closing the body bag.
- Allow the family to verify the integrity of the body before closing the body bag.
- In some regions, there is a specific member of the family who is in charge of dealing with these matters, for example, the maternal uncle. Find out and contact this person if needed to facilitate the funerals.
- If not sure that identification/verification before closing the body bag can be guaranteed, use body bag with transparent inner layer of cover which allows safe identification and verification after closing the body bag without re-opening the inner layer.¹

¹ More information at http://www.medicalproducts.com/body_bags_biovu_disaster_and_bio_hazard.asp

PREPARATION OF THE BODY

- Allow the family to hand over some belongings or clothes to the burial team to be added into the bag.
- Allow the family to witness the preparation of the dead body by the burial team, by taking pictures or video-recording the process.
- Allow the presence of other people who are not members of the family, if required, during the preparation of the dead body (washing, dressing) by the burial team; for example: members of the “Secret Society”.

TRANSPORT

- In case of death at the treatment centre, make sure that the family witness in charge of reporting to the family travels ahead of the car transporting the body to announce its arrival to the family and the village.

ARRIVAL AT THE VILLAGE

- Make sure that the burial team is preceded or at least accompanied by the family witness, to report the preparation process to the rest of the family and the population (if required), before the burial starts.
- Make sure that the burial team do not arrive dressed up in the village but are dressing up in front of the family.
- Have one of the burial team members not dressing up; let this burial team member explain safe burial procedures step by step to the bystanders, answering their questions and concerns.
- Make sure the family understands the rationale of safe burials and household disinfection.

BURIAL

- Use a coffin into which the body bag is placed, when required; pay for the coffin if need be.
- If need be, let the burial team help the family or the population to dig the graves and transport the body bag/coffin from the house or car to the grave.
- Allow the family to choose the place for the grave. If their preference cannot be adhered to, try to find out whether there is any ceremony which can symbolically replace customary burial rites.
- Allow the family to choose the orientation of the grave and of the body in the grave.
- Allow at least one representative of the family to attend the burial. If under exceptional circumstances the body needs to be buried in the absence of family members, make sure to keep a record of who is buried where.
- Allow family members to play an active role in the burial if they want to, without compromising biosafety (e.g. can carry the coffin with heavy duty gloves; cannot wash the body).
- Allow any expression of mourning that does not compromise biosafety, e.g. prayers, wailing, dance.

DISINFECTION

- To allay fears that the chlorine solution used for disinfection (usually by spraying) could be a poison try to find out whether people know the substance already (e.g. as *Eau de Javel* in Francophone countries, as bleach in Anglophone countries, or from cholera control), and point out that the solution used for Ebola control is identical or similar.

AFTERWARDS

- The burial team stays at the place until the burial is completed.
- Express condolences to the family before leaving the village; sign the book of condolence if there is one.

Don'ts

IDENTIFICATION OF THE BODY

- Do not close the body bag in the absence of one member of the family.

TRANSPORT

- Do not transport dead bodies and patients together.

BURIALS

- Do not use common graves, unless you are certain that they are acceptable.
- Don't identify burial places without the consent/advice of the family or community.

AT THE VILLAGE

- Do not arrive in the community already wearing personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Do not use threatening language; do not reinforce fears unnecessarily, which may have reached panic levels already.
- Do not act in isolation, without consideration of the population's views and needs.
- Do not underestimate the importance of transparency, e.g. the presence of the family witness, and his/her reporting back to the rest of the family and the community about the identity, the integrity and the preparation of the dead body.
- Do not put people under pressure to play an active role in the burial, as they may be too traumatized to do so.