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Boston doctor hopes to gain expertise on Ebola mission

By Felice J. Freyer | GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 13, 2014



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Dr. Nahid Bhadelia, an epidemiologist at Boston Medical Center, expects to be in Sierra Leone for two to three weeks.

First, she pulls on the surgical gloves. Then, Dr. Nahid Bhadelia climbs into a Tyvek suit resembling baggy white coveralls. Over that, she dons rubber boots, an apron, a gown, and another pair of gloves. Then, she covers her head in a hood with a clear plastic front, strapping the attached air-filtering device to her waist.

With practice, Bhadelia can get into this protective garb in about 10 minutes. In recent weeks, she has been practicing, again and again, mindful of every step, especially the high-risk task of removing clothing that, in a clinic setting, could be soiled with dangerous microbes.

It will not be comfortable in the African heat, but Bhadelia is confident this equipment will keep her safe in Sierra Leone, the heart of history's worst Ebola outbreak, where she is scheduled to go next week.

Bhadelia, an epidemiologist at Boston Medical Center, is traveling with two other Americans under the auspices of the World Health Organization. They will fly into the capital city of Freetown, meet up with other physicians, and head into the countryside.

Is she scared? "Yes. It would be cavalier not to be," Bhadelia said. "What you do in this situation is you look at it and you say, 'Can I contribute?' In my mind, what I can contribute is much higher than the fear that I have for my own safety."

Bhadelia's mission is chiefly humanitarian, but her trip is directly related to her other role in Boston, as infection control director for Boston University's National Emerging Infectious Diseases Laboratories, which is working, amid local controversy, toward approval as a Biosafety Level-4 lab. If all the approvals are obtained, the lab will study the highest-risk microbes, starting with Ebola and its cousin, Marburg.

Ronald Corley, associate director of the BU high-security lab, said Bhadelia's experience in Sierra Leone will be helpful in Boston, where he said it's only a matter of time before someone arrives at Logan Airport with Ebola or a new infectious disease. "To have a physician here who has experience on the ground, seeing patients who have hemorrhagic disease and working with the caretakers there will be incredibly valuable to us," he said.

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"What you do in this situation is you look at it and you say, 'Can I contribute?'"

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Bhadelia had been conferring with doctors at the nation's 10 other high-security labs about how the institutions would respond in the unlikely event a worker became exposed to a germ under study, or if someone sick with a dangerous bug landed at the local airport, considered the more likely scenario. Realizing none of them had even seen an Ebola case, the physicians contemplated traveling to Sierra Leone for the annual outbreak of Lassa fever, a similar but less lethal illness.

Then Ebola hit. Dr. George F. Risi, who is in charge of infection control at the National Institutes of Health's Rocky Mountain Laboratories in Montana, contacted the WHO and began planning a trip, expected to last two or three weeks. Risi, Bhadelia, and a nurse from Montana will travel from Freetown 200 miles to Kenema, bringing gowns, gloves, and masks to protect workers. (The air-purifying mask that Bhadelia has practiced using is protection beyond what is strictly needed because Ebola is not airborne.) The visiting medical professionals will care for sick patients and advise on infection control.

"It's real-world experience," Risi said, "as opposed to what we read about. What kind of adaptations should we make? There's an enormous amount we are hoping to learn from the providers who are there."

Risi described Bhadelia, 36, as brilliant and compassionate, adding, "It's just always a little daunting to see someone so young be so well trained and to know so much."

It would be hard to find a person better prepared for this journey.

Born in India and raised in Brookline, Bhadelia said she has always been concerned with global health and fascinated with infectious diseases.

"She always wanted to do something to make a difference," recalled her father, Dr. Rafeeqe Bhadelia, a neuroradiologist at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center.

The BU doctor's sister, Afsan, a researcher with the Harvard Global Equity Initiative, travels the world studying how to design health systems that fairly distribute limited resources. Social justice, she said, was part of the upbringing for all three children in the family. "It was instilled in us," she said.

So as an undergraduate at Tufts, Nahid Bhadelia majored in not just biology but also peace and justice studies.

She read Laurie Garrett's book "The Coming Plague" as a sophomore and knew then that her career would focus on infectious disease, especially emerging infections. In a recent blog post, Bhadelia explained her fascination with infectious disease, saying it cuts across "all aspects of human life, ranging from culture to economics to religious beliefs and beyond. . . It is the frontier of where man discovers his relation to the universe of living things around him."

In the mid-1990s, Bhadelia worked with HIV patients in India. As a graduate student, she traveled to Nicaragua, where she and colleagues hiked six or seven hours a day to bring basic health care to remote villages.

In addition to her medical training at Tufts and Columbia, Bhadelia earned a master's degree in international affairs and human security from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

As with so many accomplished people, Bhadelia has a talent separate from her career: She is a [photographer](#).

Bhadelia plans to bring her camera to Sierra Leone and, if time and Internet connections permit, she will blog and post photos for the world to see, in the hope of making "the faraway and scary a lot less faraway and scary."

The video below demonstrates how to use the equipment needed to take care of patients with dangerous infections.

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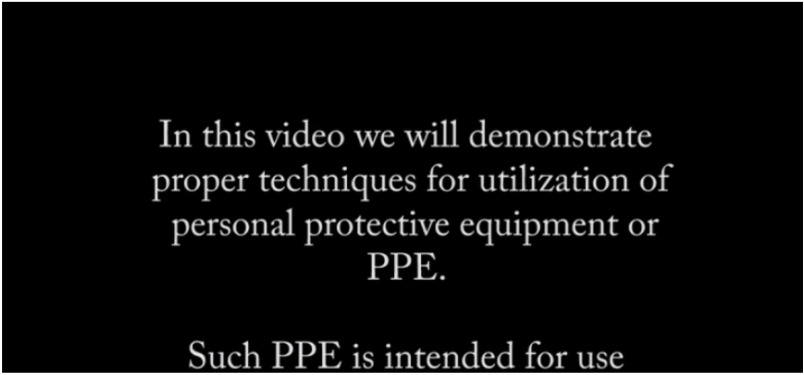
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