

SIERRA LIFESTYLES

Yosemite PA prevails over Ebola

But faces outbreak of fear at home

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One thing sticks in Brian Burt's mind from his two months working in an Ebola ward in Liberia this past autumn.

The diarrhea. It "was everywhere" inside the American-run clinic where he ventured—covered from head to toe in Personal Protective Equipment, or PPE.

In a booth at Mariposa's Happy Burger, Burt, 42, recounted the trip during the peak of the epidemic that has claimed more than 8,500 lives.

While his time in Africa was challenging, the real trial would come after his return. Back in Yosemite Valley, where he works as a physician assistant at the Yosemite Medical Clinic, neighbors avoided him—and he was subjected to an unnecessary isolation regime, he said.

"My teammates who went back to (Washington) D.C. were touring the White House," he recalled. "And here I was sitting in quarantine."

Recalling the trip, Burt flashed back to the anxiety that gripped him as the team's late-October flight to Africa approached.

His 70-person team had received advanced training. Still, the prospect of plunging into the scariest outbreak in recent memory made a big impression.

Burt's wife Hilary was pregnant with the couple's third child. He could have said no to the assignment.

But Burt—who previously treated inmates at a federal prison—wasn't one to flinch from big challenges.

As the U.S. Public Health Service team prepared for its flight, Ebola panic reached a peak as New York doctor Craig

Spencer fell ill following a mercy mission.

"The sphincter-tone was definitely increasing," Burt recalled.

Nor did things ease as team members settled into their cots, stuffed 12 to a bungalow at a camp outside of Monrovia—the Liberian capitol. Within days, multiple team members were sick with fever and diarrhea.

An unspoken question hung in the air—was it Ebola? No, it turned out.

Burt, in fact, was more comfortable than many others on the expedition.

"I had the best equipment—all my camp gear from Yosemite," he recollected.

As the team readied for its first patients, the group kept its carefully-planned assignment in mind.

Providing care for medical workers would accomplish two things. Healthcare workers, both local and from overseas, would get a morale boost from knowing that expert medical workers were backing them up. And better treatment, planners knew, would ensure that more workers returned to fight the battle.

By early December, the approach was bearing fruit. More than half of the victims in Burt's care unit were surviving Ebola. Just 30 percent of other victims were beating the disease, however.

Team members followed strict protocol when venturing into Ebola wards after suiting up in PPE.

Like astronauts on a spacewalk, the medics rehearsed a checklist. If a patient vomited, cried out—or even died—team members



Capt. Russell Bowman, left, checks Yosemite Medical Clinic's Brian Burt's goggles and PPE garb for gaps before the latter ventures into an Ebola ward. Burt and other volunteers practiced donning and taking off PPE at least nine times before flying to the Ebola zone.

BRIAN BURT | CONTRIBUTED

would not deviate from the list.

"We were told, again and again, there are no emergencies in an Ebola Treatment Unit," Burt related. "Given our training, it was hard to change your mindset and get your head around that command."

While there, all was business. Looking back, Burt will allow himself a glance back at the desperately-ill people he labored over.

You couldn't tell who would live or die. Near death at midnight, some were much improved by morning.

"They were so profoundly weak," Burt recalled of the victims. "Diarrhea like you wouldn't believe. You would tell them to drink, but they wouldn't do it."

"That's why IV rehydration therapy was so important (for survival)," he explained.

In an emotional ceremony, the first healthcare worker who emerged from the clinic alive slapped a hand print on a "survivor wall" the team erected. Over the weeks to come, more prints would attest to the difference the group had made.

Burt's time abroad was tense and rewarding. But when he returned to Yosemite, he met a stony silence that still bothers him.

Instead of a band, Burt was greeted by the county Public Health Officer—who handed him a Home Quarantine Order.

It banned Burt from going to work. He was barred from public events or even approaching closer than three feet to



Mariposa County-based Physician Assistant Brian Burt posed with Liberian Minister of Health and Social Welfare Dr. Walter Gwengigale during Burt's deployment to the Ebola-ravaged country. In part due to Burt's efforts, the number of new Ebola cases in the West African country is now vastly reduced.

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The first Ebola survivor released from the American-run unit adds his handprint to the clinic's "survivor wall." With supportive treatment, including fluid-replacement therapy, more than half of those sickened could survive Ebola. Without treatment, mortality "hovered around 70 percent," Burt said.

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other human beings.

Over the next three weeks, Burt would take his temperature twice a day—and tele-conference with then-Public Health Officer Dr. Charles Mosher to report the results each time.

While not precisely house arrest, the quarantine went beyond anything meted out to the other volunteers on their return from Africa, Burt said.

Like Kaci Hickox, the Maine nurse who protested a quarantine order in her home state in October, Burt saw his enforced isolation as irrational and unjust.

Science shows that patients can only transmit the virus when they have a fever, both healthcare workers pointed out.

The county's multi-million dollar tourism industry likely had something to do with the

strict local policy, Burt said.

Small-town psychology was another factor, he related. "Rumors were flying around that Valley," Burt said last week. "Parents were calling the school and asking if it was safe for their kids to go."

"I was anxious. I couldn't sleep. I felt thwarted by my community," he summed up.

Looking back, Burt's feelings have mellowed. Understanding has replaced the sting he formerly felt.

"I understand the fear," he said. "People were acting in ways the media had trained them."

Today, Burt feels "a sense of pride" when he looks back at his Liberian mission.

While he never enjoyed a parade, Burt probably qualifies as a "front-line hero"—his term for the Liberians who risked their lives during the epidemic's peak weeks.



African news media crowd around Liberian President Ellen John Sirleaf during her visit to an American-run Ebola Treatment Unit this past autumn. The facility was designed to provide treatment for local and international healthcare workers, Yosemite-based team-member Brian Burt said.

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A mural in Monrovia, the capitol of Liberia, relates Ebola symptoms using pictures to communicate with non-literate people. Many Liberians believed Ebola was a "made-up" hoax—a factor that complicated public health efforts in the country, Burt said.

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