The Best Defense

Although the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa appears to be slowing, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cited it as the largest Ebola epidemic in history. In Liberia, more than 9,600 cases and 4,300 deaths have been reported. WQP Associate Editor Amy McIntosh reached out to G. Ruffner Page Jr., president of McWane Inc., to learn how a global collaboration is delivering clean water to Liberia to help fight this epidemic.

AMY MCINTOSH: What is the current state of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa?
G. RUFFNER PAGE JR.: Thankfully, Ebola has now been contained in Liberia. However, it is still too soon to consider the country Ebola-free. As most of us know, Ebola is highly contagious and spread through bodily fluids. The work McWane, the Coca Cola Africa Foundation, WaterHealth Intl. and the Global Environment & Technology Foundation have been doing ensures that safe, clean water is available to continue fighting this deadly outbreak. Safe, clean water—and the infrastructure to deliver it—is central to everything we do.

MCINTOSH: What role does clean water play in fighting a disease like Ebola?
PAGE: Water is one of the most critical—if not the most critical—elements of fighting a fast-spreading disease like this. As much as 52 gal of water a day are needed to treat each Ebola patient. Because it is important for patients to stay hydrated, much of the water is used for drinking—but the need does not end there. Clean water is needed for washing clothes and sanitizing patients’ hands and bodies. It is also used to clean the outfits worn by doctors and nurses, as well as medical supplies and facilities. Without clean, safe water, it is very difficult to contain the spread of Ebola.

The availability of safe, clean water—of sound water infrastructure—is one of the best defenses any community can have against all manners of infectious diseases. The U.N. has recognized that access to clean drinking water is a human right, but all too many people are denied this basic necessity. That will not change until more of us get involved in this effort.

MCINTOSH: What is the Replenish Africa Initiative? What are its goals?
PAGE: The Replenish Africa Initiative (RAIN) aims to improve access to clean water for 2 million people in Africa by the end of 2015. RAIN is made possible by a six-year, $30 million dollar commitment by the Coca-Cola Co. and the support of more than 140 partners [that] provide development expertise and additional resources required to implement the projects sustainably.

MCINTOSH: How are the McWane Foundation and its partners helping deliver safe water to the Ebola treatment units in Liberia?
PAGE: McWane’s expertise for nearly a century has been building sustainable, safe and reliable water and wastewater delivery systems. While our pipe and fittings are installed in cities and towns across America and beyond, we are also deeply committed to human health and sustainability around the world. Knowing how crucial access to clean, safe drinking water is in fighting Ebola, we knew we had to step up to the plate and help in whatever ways we could.

Thankfully, we are working with partners who not only know the issues and logistical challenges from the ground up, but are utterly committed to seeing this effort through to success.

The new WaterHealth Centre in Bomi County, Liberia, is one remarkable product of that collaboration. And the local community there will now have access to what many of us take for granted: clean, safe and reliable water at the turn of a tap.

MCINTOSH: Please explain the logistics of the water treatment system.
PAGE: The coalition’s technology provided residents in Bomi County with purified drinking water and the training necessary to maintain this precious resource. The water now flowing there exceeds World Health Organization standards. Before any water flows out of the spigots, it is put through several extensive purification tests against a variety of viruses, germs, bacteria [and] parasites. This is literally saving lives and providing fresh hope in places where hope has been more elusive than clean water. The community now has ready access to safe, sanitized water. As the world mobilizes to fight the spread of highly contagious diseases such as Ebola, we hope systems like these will become a sustainable model.

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