

Press release: UK Aid opens refurbished hospital laboratory in Sierra Leone

Today the UK Government and the Sierra Leone Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MoHS) will formally open a newly refurbished diagnostic laboratory at Connaught hospital in Freetown.

This is the third and final laboratory built with UK Aid that will be handed over to ministry leadership alongside 2 additional facilities in Makeni and Bo. A cohort of 15 Sierra-Leonean hospital staff has also been fully trained as technicians to work in the laboratories.

Funded by UK Aid and implemented by Public Health England (PHE) in partnership with MoHS, the project supports the country's public health capacity to detect and control the spread of high consequence infectious diseases like Ebola and Yellow Fever, using the latest diagnostic techniques.

In the same week, the newly trained technicians will graduate following completion of a PHE-led molecular virology training programme. Sierra Leone has a very limited number of doctors and nurses, and Ebola had a tragic impact on that already stretched capacity. The process of training new staff is an essential part of efforts to rebuild that capacity.

Several of the graduates have also undergone additional training which will allow them to train future cohorts in molecular diagnostic techniques to ensure this knowledge and skill-set is passed on, helping to sustain this critical capability for the long-term.

The laboratories are part of a broader UK programme of support which is helping to strengthen the Government of Sierra Leone's own capacity to better deal with serious future health outbreaks following the devastation caused by Ebola in 2014.

The premises include a fully equipped molecular facility which will allow the MoHS to test for a range of high consequence pathogens, with Ebola testing being specifically supported by the UK Aid-funded Resilient Zero programme.

A ceremony is being held at the Connaught Hospital in Freetown to mark the handing over of the completed building works from the UK Government to the ministry. The laboratories will be opened by HE Dr Abu Bakarr Fofanah, Minister of Health and Sanitation, Dr Brima Kargbo, Sierra Leone's Chief Medical Officer and HE Guy Warrington, British High Commissioner in Sierra Leone and Duncan Selbie, Chief Executive of PHE.

The refurbishment will create an environment where high-risk samples (such as those from suspected Ebola cases) can be tested safely, and will also allow the Government of Sierra Leone to further expand diagnostic capacity in other

areas for both infectious and non-infectious diseases, and thereby strengthening the public health system in Sierra Leone in the long-term.

Chief Medical Officer of Sierra Leone, Dr Brima Kargbo said:

The recognition of diseases through the laboratory system is the foundation of disease control and prevention. Therefore, accurate and timely laboratory services has become the bedrock upon which current disease treatment, prevention and control programmes are based. The reliance on laboratory-derived information has, for several years, been in line with the development of modern medicine and public health. At this stage we are grateful to the UK Government for their invaluable support in this direction.

British High Commissioner, Guy Warrington, who spoke at the launch, said:

I want to congratulate the Ministry of Health and Sanitation for the progress that has been made to renovate these facilities under their leadership. I also want to recognise the newly trained molecular lab technicians for their vital work in running these labs. On behalf of the UK Government I am proud that we were able to support this important work through UK Aid funding and with the valuable expertise provided by our colleagues at Public Health England. I look forward to these labs continuing to serve the people of Sierra Leone and helping keep them safe from infectious diseases for many years to come.

Duncan Selbie, Chief Executive of Public Health England said:

The people of Sierra Leone are hugely resilient and have coped with a huge amount of destruction and disease in recent years. I am proud of the part that PHE has played in working with the Sierra Leone government to help strengthen Sierra Leone's health system and grow the country's ability to protect itself against potentially devastating diseases.

In Sierra Leone alone, the Ebola outbreak killed around 4,000 people, with more than 8,700 cases confirmed. The recovery costs for the country have been estimated at \$844 million. Recently the country has also been tragically hit by mudslides, which killed over 500 people. The UK Public Health Rapid Support Team was deployed to tackle the prevention of potential cholera outbreaks following the mudslides.

The new public health capability, as well as the establishment of a national public health institute in Sierra Leone itself, are both positive results of the national and international learnings from the Ebola outbreak.

From January 2018 PHE begins a two-year ODA funded programme of supporting MoHS in developing public health infrastructure to meet International Health Regulations (IHR). The focus of the Sierra Leone element of the programme will be on long term sustainability of laboratories, and IHR capacity building integrated within health system strengthening.

- in Sierra Leone, the average lifespan is roughly half that of western nations and malnutrition ranks among the world's highest – poverty remains pervasive, particularly in the Eastern and Northern regions with more than 6 out of 10 people living on less than a euro a day
- in recent years, although Sierra Leone had a population of 7 million, there were only around 100 doctors and between 200 to 300 nurses in employment to respond to illness and disease
- as part of the Resilient Zero programme, over 300 local staff have been trained in emergency planning
- since the beginning of the year, 15 Sierra Leone MoHS laboratory technicians have been trained in molecular diagnostics at Bo and Makeni – all have completed a 6-week molecular virology practical courses which was followed by supervised working at PHE operated molecular laboratories.
- introduction into concepts of virology was provided through a short course held early 2017, and tutorials on broader concepts of infections accompanied the practical training
- PHE has had a presence in Sierra Leone since 2012, initially to assist with a cholera outbreak, but also played a vital role in working with DfID, WHO and the Sierra Leone MOHS to manage the Ebola outbreak; the UK Public Health Rapid Support team has also recently been deployed to Sierra Leone to assist with disease surveillance and help prevent outbreaks of infection following the tragic mudslides
- the UK has committed a £427 million package of support to help contain, control, treat, and ultimately prevent Ebola.