Blood as medicine: social meanings of blood and the success of Ebola trials

The urgent need to contain the Ebola epidemic has led to clinical treatment trials being fast-tracked, including a trial of blood or plasma from Ebola survivors. However, the taking of blood samples is associated with fear and reticence throughout sub-Saharan Africa, including rumours of blood stealing. In the context of the convalescent blood trial (Ebola_Tx trial, to begin Jan 15–21, 2015), blood has an ambiguous meaning; although the blood of people who are ill should be avoided, the transfer of blood from Ebola survivors is a potential treatment. Anecdotal reports from the field that the blood from Ebola survivors is being traded informally, suggest it is already a valuable commodity. Meanwhile, rumours are circulating in some Guinean communities that patients with Ebola in treatment centres are being given infected blood to hasten death. Such perceptions should not be dismissed as superstitions or ignorance because they function as a means to understand the cause of misfortune and manifest as magico-religious beliefs, such as sorcery, the influence of ancestors, or the will of God. Furthermore, these perceptions reflect a historically forged mistrust towards specific institutions, reinforced by social inequality, conflict, and a conviction that some people are rich and influential at the cost of the poor.

For example, the epicentre of the Ebola epidemic was also the location of epidemics of sleeping sickness that were fought in colonial times with the blood of people who are ill should be avoided, the transfer of blood in treatment centres are being given infected blood to hasten death. In treatment camps, the legacy of epidemics of sleeping sickness that were fought in colonial times with the blood of people who are ill should be avoided, the transfer of blood in treatment centres are being given infected blood to hasten death. In treatment camps, the legacy of epidemics of sleeping sickness that were fought in colonial times with the blood of people who are ill should be avoided, the transfer of blood in treatment centres are being given infected blood to hasten death.

We declare no competing interests.

Koen Peeters Grietens, on behalf of the Ebola_Tx Trial Platform, see appendix 5. This correction has been made to the online version as of Oct 31, 2014.