

Preventing the spread of Ebola

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Ebola is a deadly viral infection that has so far mainly been present in Central and West Africa. Many people in those regions are either unfamiliar with the disease, do not believe in it, or don't know how to prevent infection. For this reason, UNICEF was active in The Gambia, West Africa, among other places, between 2014 and 2016, running information campaigns on how to prevent the spread of Ebola.

At the time, although neighbouring countries were afflicted with the virus, The Gambia was Ebola-free, and has remained so to date. The charity focussed on raising awareness among the local population and on changing habits – including regular handwashing with soap, calling the Ebola hotline when suspected cases of infection arose, and not touching those who were ill. In parallel with this campaign, behavioural psychologists at Eawag conducted a field study on how effective each of the interventions was.

"The psychological elements of such campaigns are very often overlooked", says Eawag psychologist and behavioural biologist Hans Joachim Mosler. According to him, the behaviour of humans is a combination of psychological influences. In the case of Ebola prevention, these include observing what others are doing; the perceived certainty that a particular behaviour will prevent a disease, or the commitment to behaving in this way oneself.

The results of the field study indicate that three intervention measures in particular contributed to the desired changes in behaviour: home visits, posters in public places, and information sheets. Handing out hygiene kits that contained soap and a flyer, on the other hand, were ineffective — in other words, they did not lead to increased handwashing. "Clearly, this intervention did not have any psychological influence that could have led to a change in behaviour", says Hans Joachim Mosler. The findings from this study are important for future outbreaks of Ebola, he says, as well as for other epidemics.

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