

"Effectiveness of Z Mapp yet to be ascertained"

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Padma Shri Dr Virander S Chauhan, former director, ICGEB, believes that there is an immediate need to prioritize the creation of an effective system of response for Ebola like outbreaks in India. Replying to queries from *BioSpectrum* on whether India would be able to cope with an outbreak of such a large magnitude, Dr Chauhan explained, "While it could be possible in European states but in India where in case there is an unknown infection in a village in Tripura or Assam, we may not know it. There is a need as a nation, to prioritize the creation of such a system." He added further, "A surveillance system, after the bird flu epidemic broke, was set up in Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong. In India, we had a facility where the birds were collected from across India for culling and data collection. A Surveillance system is important. "

On being asked about the recently prescribed drug for Ebola, Z Mapp, that was prepared on genetically modified tobacco leaves, Dr Chauhan remarked, "Z Mapp is not a drug. It is a mixture of two monoclonal antibodies and is given as a therapeutic. There is no reason to believe it will work or also whether it will not. It was administered to an Indian American who might have been taken care of in good conditions. Whether that will work in other settings needs to be seen. So, the GM connection at the moment is unnecessary. In any case, the bypassing of rules is even allowed by WHO too now in emergency cases. When a person is dying, there is no relevance of few regulations which can be kept aside for that moment."

Dr Chauhan who is one of the eminent scientists of India, mentioned further, "There is no case of Ebola in Asia, Europe. Since, it doesn't transmit through air, it is easier to contain. However, overall we cannot prepare for all infections in advance. But no doubt the systems have to be in place. Response has to be there. We don't know what will strike where? Whether SARS or Bird Flu, it is just impossible to predict. When Ebola struck Germany from Spain, it took one week for the country to sequence it. Sharing of information is important. World Health Organization (WHO) too has been advising that sharing such data is critical and must be reported and shared immediately without hiding it."