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Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Examining Medical Product Development in the Wake of the Ebola
Epidemic”
Subcommittee on Health
November 19, 2014

The Ebola epidemic in West Africa is a devastating public health crisis. To date, more than 5,000 people have died from the disease and over 14,000 people have been infected according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Many more cases are expected as this crisis overwhelms the affected countries’ public health systems.

We have a responsibility to help end this outbreak, not only to help alleviate the suffering of those in West Africa, but also to prevent this devastating illness from spreading further. And we must take actions now to prevent outbreaks like this from occurring again in the future.

Today’s hearing will focus on one important piece of this goal: drug and vaccine development for treatment and prevention of Ebola. We need to look closely at why there are essentially no effective medicines or vaccines for this devastating illness.

In the United States, we rely on the pharmaceutical industry to discover, develop, and deliver new medicines to patients. This system works because there is a sufficient patient population that needs new medicines, our healthcare system can pay for the new treatments, and the industry can thereby recoup its investment.

But Ebola is different. The need for the drug is sporadic, the U.S. patient population is almost nonexistent, and the countries with the most Ebola patients cannot afford to pay high prices.

So this is an instance in which the private market does not work. With Ebola, the federal government must drive the development of medicines by working with pharmaceutical companies.

At our last hearing, we heard that the federal agencies have indeed stepped up their efforts. The Committee has also heard from companies with promising drug, diagnostic, or vaccine candidates who told us that the government has been acting as an effective partner.

For our federal agencies to continue to support the development of these products, Congress must provide increased funding now and ensure the stability of that funding going forward.

That is why I support President Obama's emergency request. The request would provide the resources needed immediately to strengthen the ability of U.S. public health systems to respond to Ebola and address the current outbreak in West Africa. It includes over \$400 million for NIH, FDA, and BARDA, the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority, to support the development, manufacture, and testing of Ebola diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines. And the request also sets the groundwork to strengthen global health systems to better prevent, detect, and respond to future disease outbreaks. Congress must act on this request promptly.

But we also need to make sure this isn't a one-time funding increase in the wake of an emergency. We should avoid a cycle in which we let our guard down once the immediate public health crisis passes and don't renew our efforts until the next emergency occurs, and we find ourselves unprepared again. This kind of "boom/bust" approach to preparedness simply does not work. We must ensure that we establish a continuous operation—and provide continuous funding—so we are prepared for the next outbreak.

I thank the witnesses for being here today and for your tireless efforts to help alleviate the suffering of those afflicted by the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.