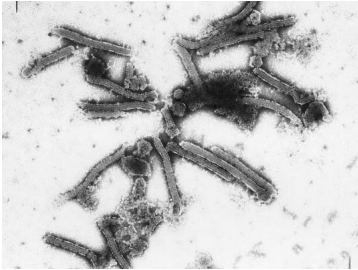


25 years ago, a different Ebola outbreak - in USA

Matthew Barakat, Associated Press 11:06 a.m. EDT August 10, 2014



(Photo: AP)

RESTON, Va. (AP) — It had all the makings of a public-health horror story: an outbreak of a wildly deadly virus on the doorstep of the nation's capital, with dozens of lab monkeys dead, multiple people testing positive, and no precedent in this country on how to contain it.

Americans' introduction to the Ebola virus came 25 years ago in an office park near Washington Dulles International Airport, a covert crisis that captivated the public only years later when it formed the basis of a bestselling book.

Initially thought to be the same hyper-deadly strain as the current Ebola outbreak that has killed hundreds in Africa, the previously unknown Reston variant turned out to be nonlethal to humans. But the story of what might have been illustrates how far U.S. scientists have come in their understanding of a virus whose very name strikes fear, even in a country where no one has fatally contracted it.

Gerald Jaax, one of the leaders of a team of Army scientists that responded to the 1989 outbreak in Reston, Virginia, closely watched the meticulously planned transfers this month of two American aid workers from Liberia to a specialized facility in Atlanta, the first Ebola patients ever brought to the U.S. Jaax recalled his days urgently trying to corral the country's first known outbreak.

In the fall of 1989, dozens of macaques imported from the Philippines suddenly died at Hazelton Research Products' primate quarantine unit in Reston, where animals were kept and later sold for lab testing. Company officials contacted the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick, Md. — Jaax's unit — concerned they might be dealing with an outbreak of hemorrhagic fever among the monkeys.

Initial testing revealed something much worse: Ebola, specifically the Zaire strain, which had a 90 percent fatality rate in humans. Four workers at the quarantine facility tested positive for exposure to the virus.

Amazingly, they never even got sick.

Researchers eventually realized they were dealing with a different strain, one now known as Ebola-Reston. Though its appearance under a microscope is similar to the Zaire strain, Ebola-Reston is the only one of the five forms of Ebola not harmful to humans.