

Missionary Ebola survivor donates blood to another infected physician

by [Karen Weintraub](#)

September 16, 2014

c. 2014 USA Today

(RNS) An American physician who contracted Ebola while working in a West African hospital has received a blood transfusion from another American missionary doctor who survived the disease, hospital officials confirmed Thursday.

Physician Richard Sacra, who is being treated at the Nebraska Medical Center's special biocontainment unit, received the blood donation from doctor Kent Brantly, who was treated for Ebola and released from an Atlanta hospital last month. Both men contracted Ebola while caring for patients in Monrovia, Liberia, while working for missionary groups.

Sacra, 51, also received an experimental therapy. Doctors have not revealed its name.

Sacra is recovering well, his wife, Debbie, and his doctor, Phil Smith, medical director of the biocontainment unit, said at a news conference last week.

Brantly received a blood donation from a teenage survivor of Ebola while he was still in Liberia. The World Health Organization has said that such transfusions—which transfer not just blood, but disease-fighting antibodies—should be the top priority for research into new Ebola treatments.

Brantly and another missionary, Nancy Writebol, received an experimental drug called ZMapp that has never been formally tested in humans. Supplies of ZMapp have been exhausted, according to its manufacturer, which was in the early stages of developing the drug. The drug takes months to produce. Brantly and Writebol recovered and returned home, while Miguel Pajares, a 75-year-old Spanish priest who was infected while doing mission work in Liberia, received the drug but died, according to news reports.

Doctors have said they don't know what allowed Brantly to survive—the transfusion, the experimental drug, or the care he received at Atlanta's Emory University Hospital.

Brantly had been in Africa volunteering for missionary group Samaritan's Purse. His blood is the same type as Sacra's. Brantly briefly talked to Sacra, in the special isolation unit, using video chat, according to a spokesman for Samaritan's Purse.

Sacra and Writebol work for a different missionary group, SIM USA. A fourth, unidentified health worker with Ebola was flown from West Africa to Emory this week for care.

Across West Africa—particularly in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea—Ebola has sickened more than 4,000 people and killed more than half of its victims, according to the World Health Organization. A separate outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo has struck 62 people, killing 35.

Asked about the ethics of giving someone a drug that has no track record in humans, Thomas Geisbert, an Ebola expert at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, said the results of tests on animals were strong and the need great.

It will be extremely difficult to figure out whether the drug Sacra received or the Zmapp used by earlier Ebola patients contributed to their recovery. For that, Geisbert said, much bigger trials will be needed. The World Health Organization has said it hopes that five to 10 drugs that have shown promise in animals can begin widespread testing in people in the coming months.

Sacra, a family physician from Worcester, Massachusetts, had gone to Liberia in early August to care for patients, mostly pregnant women, who did not have Ebola but were unable to get medical care.

Liberia, a country of more than 4 million people, had only a few dozen doctors before the outbreak and virtually all other medical care stopped in the country because of the epidemic.

On Friday night of Labor Day weekend, Sacra called his wife and told her he had a fever and was anxious that it might be Ebola, she said at the news conference at the Nebraska Medical Center. He stayed in isolation and began taking malaria treatment

and Tylenol to lower his fever, but by Sunday he was quite concerned that he had Ebola, she said. Blood tests Monday showed that he had the disease.

Debbie Sacra said she did not hear from her husband again until late Wednesday, at which point he was too weak to talk on the phone for more than a few minutes. He was evacuated by plane the following day, September 4, arriving in Nebraska the next day.

On Saturday and Sunday, Sacra had a transfusion with blood from Brantly, Smith said. Sacra has also been given the experimental drug every day of his stay, said Angela Hewlett, associate medical director of the biocontainment unit.

Sacra has had irregular heartbeats and an electrolyte imbalance, Smith and Hewlett said. He is being fed intravenously, though he has begun to eat some foods.

Debbie Sacra, who has been talking to him via Skype, said he is starting to read magazines and is about 80 percent of his old self mentally after being significantly disoriented for most of the past week. The disease has weakened him considerably, she said.

In addition to thanking God and science for his recovery, Debbie said her husband wants to make sure that the public recognizes the full extent of the tragedy unfolding in West Africa.

He hopes that in the aftermath of the epidemic, the health care system in Liberia can be built back better than before “so they’re not at risk of this kind of disaster again,” she said. “He will do everything he can from here on out to make sure this is true.”

Asked if he would return to help fight the epidemic, Debbie Sacra chuckled.

“He’s going to be ready to go back,” she said. “He loves Liberia. He loves taking care of the old people. He loves joshing with the young men. They say he is a Liberian with white skin.”

Also last week, Partners in Health, co-founded by Paul Farmer “to provide a preferential option for the poor in health care,” announced that it would be collaborating with two other groups to open two Ebola treatment units in rural areas, one in Liberia and one in Sierra Leone, and work to strengthen the primary health care systems in both countries.