

## Media Release

### Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

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## University expertise in fight against Ebola

The work of University of Tasmania psychology Professor Douglas Paton is playing a key role in the battle against the Ebola virus disease in West Africa.

That battle is fierce. The World Health Organization (WHO) has labelled the Ebola epidemic “the most severe acute public health emergency seen in modern times”. As of 28 September, more than 3300 people had died in the outbreak with a total of more than 7000 cases reported. Estimates suggest the number of cases is doubling every two to three weeks.

The WHO is drawing on resources and expertise from around the globe as efforts to halt the spread of the outbreak intensify.

A specialist in building community preparedness and resilience to natural hazards using community engagement practices, the Faculty of Health’s Professor Paton has been advising the WHO on how best to communicate with people in affected areas to reduce the risk of disease transmission and promote self-care.

“There are two things at the heart of the response to Ebola – the need to help those who are sick and the need to help those who aren’t sick stay that way,” Professor Paton said.

“It’s the second part of the task, helping healthy people stay healthy, where my work comes into play. How do we best communicate with people so that we can change their behavior and reduce risk?”

Professor Paton has brought his psychological expertise to the field of natural hazard research since 1996, examining community and environmental psychology in relation to large scale events such as bushfire, tsunamis, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

“My research focuses on understanding how people make decisions about managing risk from complex, potentially threatening and infrequent natural hazards,” he said.

“Whether a warning is effective depends on a number of things – how is it understood, is it likely to be acted upon and can it be acted upon within a certain timeframe? All of those questions hinge on preparation.

“To reduce risk in a community, we need to understand why some people prepare and others don’t and we need to tailor our response accordingly.”

The WHO first approached Professor Paton 18 months ago, keen to incorporate his research into their health emergency training. Then Ebola hit. As the outbreak spread through Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, what had been a case of good forward-planning became a key part of the response to an ongoing public health catastrophe.

Professor Paton has been providing advice to the WHO, which uses it to shape strategies on the ground. Information comes back from the armies of health workers, community workers and volunteers and adjustments are made.

“We need to explain to the people in these communities what the dangers are and what they need to do to avoid them and we need to do that in a way that ensures people act on that information,” Professor Paton said.

“Ebola is spread through direct contact with the blood or bodily fluids of infected people. It’s a terrible disease but it’s one we can fight with some simple risk mitigation strategies.”

Where the outbreak has occurred is affecting the approach. The most affected countries have weak health systems and lack key infrastructure and human resources.

“We are dealing with resource issues, cultural issues and economic issues,” Professor Paton said.

“There are some areas where westerners are not trusted so we have to identify the people who can deliver these messages effectively.

“And we need to prevent health advice conflicting with economic and livelihood issues. People will not act on warnings if, by doing so, it stops them from being able to provide for their family – so what other support can we provide to make sure that isn’t the choice they are faced with.”

Visit <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/ebola/en/> for more information on the Ebola virus disease and the worldwide efforts to halt its spread.

**Information released by:**

University of Tasmania, Communications and Media Office

Phone: 61 3 6324 9874

Email: [Media.Office@utas.edu.au](mailto:Media.Office@utas.edu.au)