The 2013-16 epidemic of Ebola virus disease underscored the shortcomings of the international community to both respond to outbreaks and conduct critical research in complex humanitarian crises. To address these concerns the UK Public Health Rapid Support Team (UK-PHRST), funded by UK Aid from the Department of Health and Social Care, was formed. The UK-PHRST is a collaboration between Public Health England and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine with the University of Oxford and Kings College London as academic partners. The UK-PHRST has a novel triple mandate to work in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) to:

- Respond to outbreaks
- Conduct innovative operational research during and between outbreaks to generate evidence on best practices
- Build Low-to-Middle Income Country (LMIC) and regional capacity for outbreak response

The core deployable team consists of:

- Microbiologists
- Epidemiologists
- Clinical researchers
- Social scientists
- Data scientists
- Infection prevention & control experts
- Field logisticians

MULTI-DISCIPLINARY DEPLOYABLE TEAM

The UK-PHRST Mandate

The UK-PHRST Microbiology is committed to performing operational research to improve outbreak response in LMICs. These studies conducted in between outbreaks as well as rapid implementation of studies during deployment. A rapid ethical approval mechanism has been developed in collaboration with the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine Ethics Committee to fast-track ethical review and approval to enable an agile in-field research response by the UK-PHRST.

UK-PHRST has regular open research calls to initiate and stimulate outbreak related research that supports work from within and external to the UK-PHRST. Currently this funding mechanism supports nine research projects spanning a comprehensive set of disciplines integral to effective outbreak response, including anthropology, clinical management, clinical research, epidemiology, microbiology, psychology, sociology and water, sanitation, and hygiene.

UK-PHRST DEPLOYMENTS

UK-PHRST in Action – Sierra Leone

The UK-PHRST can respond to humanitarian disasters where there is an increased risk of infectious disease outbreaks. The disastrous flooding and landslides in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in August 2017 resulted in over 800 deaths. The UK-PHRST was deployed after a direct request from the Government of Sierra Leone. A UK-PHRST team of epidemiologists, microbiologists and a field logistician supported extended surveillance and case investigation for water-borne disease.

EXAMPLES: MICROBIOLOGY OUTBREAK RESPONSE IN 48 HOURS

UK-PHRST in Action – Sierra Leone

To support the core team a reserve cadre is being formed to increase the operational surge capacity of the UK-PHRST. Through agreement with their current employers, these reserves will be on call for the UK-PHRST while maintaining their full-time jobs. Reserves complete the same core UK-PHRST training regime to ensure their operational readiness.

EXAMPLES: MICROBIOLOGY CAPACITY BUILDING IN THE FIELD

UK-PHRST RESERVISTS

The UK-PHRST Reserve Cadre will provide surge capacity and enhanced expertise to the core deployable team. Reservists will remain employed by their primary organization and be released only when required to deploy. Reservists are expected to deploy up to two times during an 18 month period and will hold PHE bank contracts. Deployments will be for four-to-six weeks.

UK-PHRST releases call for reservists periodically and Microbiology is always interested in recruiting high calibre scientists, especially French speakers, with experience in diagnostics, high-containment microbiology and field work in LMICs.

Successful reservists from all disciplines will be invited to attend a week-long scenario-based pre-deployment course where realities and challenges associated with working in the field are presented and discussed. In addition, microbiology reservists will be expected to undergo an additional laboratory-based training programme where familiarity with our equipment, assays and documentation (e.g. SOPs, Risk Assessments, Code of Practice, etc) is undertaken.

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