

US Ebola hysteria and money pit highlight lack of resources to confront diseases that kill far more people

Ebola is all the rage in the developed world. We tend to react to publicity events more than health issues. In the United States, for example, 39,000 people have died of heart disease in the time it took one person to die from Ebola, but the White House is not appointing a Heart Disease Czar any time soon.

It's good that people are thinking about health issues in developing nations but while it will assuage our [guilt](#) that we have Done Something, if we wanted to really help people we could tackle a disease that killed 20 percent of the Americans it infected in its most recent outbreak, and that is in the superior health care system of the United States.

That disease is listeria.

How many people just stopped reading because listeria is not in the *New York Times*?

They are not alone in not caring much. Listeria does not happen often in the U.S., here it is primarily an affliction of wealthy elites who engage in food fads, like raw sprouts and unpasteurized dairy products, though in 2011 [33 people died from a batch of food that contained listeria](#) and they were just buying regular fruit and not saving us all from FrankenCantaloupe. Instead, it primarily afflicts poor nations who are not making a choice to poison themselves like raw milk consumers do.

In the developing world, listeria is dangerous because it can grow in refrigerated environments. Nearly 21 percent of victims are pregnant women and it resulted in nearly 15 percent infant mortality, according a new paper in [The Lancet Infectious Diseases](#). De Noordhout et al. did a systematic review of 87 studies and determined that listeria resulted in just over 23,000 illness in 2010. The 23,000 instances worldwide doesn't so bad – after all, almost 4,000 Europeans got sick just from *E. coli* due to organic food in one outbreak in 2011 – but only 53 of those organic consumers died. In listeria, over 5,000 patients did, making it far more deadly than *Salmonella* or *E. coli*. [An outbreak in Denmark two months ago](#) resulted in 15 deaths out of 38 illnesses. If 20 percent of American patients in an outbreak die, and 24 percent of victims in developing nations do, it means the best health care system in the world is barely protecting us.

So we should tackle the issue at the source. The first challenge is understanding the scope of the problem. [The researchers found that half of countries don't even have the resources to report listeria](#) so more understanding of how often it occurs is vital The second issue is preventing it wherever possible. Some ways to get listeria are clearly First World problems, it is unlikely poor people in India are eating feta cheese – but they can be educated about the risks of unwashed and poorly stored food for almost no cost at all, and it will cause outbreaks to plummet.

It's not fashionable but it's time to start caring about the non-trendy illnesses too. And if you are in a country where you have a choice about ways to get listeria, [stop buying raw milk](#).

Hank Campbell is founder of [Science 2.0](#) and an award-winning science writer who has appeared in numerous publications, from Wired to the Wall Street Journal. In 2012 he was co-author of the bestselling book *Science Left Behind*. Follow him on Twitter [@HankCampbell](#).