

# Ebola Alert

(Dennis de Peiza)

The world would recall that in February 2002, it was confronted with the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Disease, commonly known as SARS. Medical experts have described it as respiratory illness that was both contagious and sometimes fatal. In 2003 it accounted for 774 deaths worldwide. This disease was cause for panic and naturally so, considering the consequential impact it could have on life, the social and economic fallout for societies, and the real threat it posed to workplace productivity.

Prior to that, the world was challenged in the 1980's with the presence of the HIV/ AIDS virus, which was said to have emerged from the Sub Sahara region of the African Continent. Both of were these were the cause of some hysteria and panic in the workplace, as many were concerned about how either disease could have been contracted. These are but two of the recent pandemics that had the potential of negatively impacting on the productivity of the workforce.

With the passage of time, the world faces yet another health crisis. The treat faced by the Ebola virus is like a ranging tornado or fast moving storm, over which nobody has a measure of control. There are no known remedies, and protective measures to guard employees in the workplace cannot be reduced to simply the use of a protective mask or gloves. The exposure of all to this potential lethal virus, is virtually akin to the dropping of the atomic bomb on an unsuspecting and defenseless people.

It is in times like these, that there is growing respect for those frontline workers who are expected to be the guardians of the society, while they themselves are nothing more than the sacrificial lambs. It is a fact that some workers have to be on the front line. If nothing else, the Ebola crisis should help the citizenry to have a greater appreciation for the work these workers do.

Those who work in the health care system are most vulnerable. They are joined by immigration and customs officers at the ports of entry. Those workers, whose jobs do not require them to be on the front line, may be of the opinion that there is no immediate threat of danger. While that may be true, to arrive at this position, is tantamount to becoming complacent. In the world of work, employees come into contact with both internal and external customers on a daily basis. The fact that the symptoms of the Ebola disease are very similar to what were associated with SARS, should begin to raise some conscious thinking.

Bearing in mind the nature of the disease and the way it is spread, this presents some difficulty for management and employees in their efforts to strategize against the looming threat. The fact that there is heavy interaction and travel in today's business world, this raises some alarm that the demise of some business could be imminent. Already some economies are struggling to survive, and a pandemic such as Ebola is the last thing which the world would want to have hanging around.

The possibility exists that the Ebola disease can trigger industrial relations nightmares. Take for example the reported case in the twin island state of Trinidad and Tobago, where dock workers refused to service an oil tanker that arrived from the African continent. The use of scab labour was the alternate choice. While the position of the workers is understandable and possibly justifiable in the circumstances where fear of the unknown was paramount, the all-important question to be posed...Is a dangerous precedent being set with the convenient use of scab labour?

To evoke a panic mode, is definitely not the answer to responding to the challenge. It leaves much to ponder about, where countries who rely heavily on imports to feed their people and to supply the wholesale and retail sector, would resort to turning away vessels or aircrafts, where there is a suspected victim of Ebola on board. It would seem that the only logical thing to do would be to support to whatever preventative and precautionary measures that can be or are being put in place.