Will Ebola Affect the Hospitality Business?

By Dr. Chuck Kelley

In the last few days, reports on Ebola have been all over the news, and there is now talk of travel restrictions and screenings. Is this justifiable prudence, or is it perhaps a case where fear of the unknown is creating hysteria? Let’s consider a few basic facts and compare Ebola to the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), since the two diseases are similar in many ways.

Both Ebola and HIV originated in Africa’s wild animal populations. HIV came from monkeys while Ebola came from fruit bats. Both viruses jumped from the animal species where they originated to humans and are now being transmitted from human to human.

Both viruses are transmitted the same way, by direct contact with bodily fluids, including such apparently benign fluids as saliva, from infected people.

The outbreak of HIV was first recognized about 1981 and has now spread to over 35 million people, predominantly through sexual contact. Ebola has broken out repeatedly since it was identified in 1976, but each outbreak has died out without spreading around the globe. The current outbreak in Africa has infected about 8,000 people, half of whom have died.

Both HIV and Ebola are serious, often fatal, diseases. But HIV is a slow killer, taking many years to run its course, while Ebola can bring death very quickly.

Africa’s current Ebola outbreak is occurring in places where medical services are extremely limited and personal protective equipment is sorely lacking, causing many people to be directly exposed to the bodily fluids of the sick and dying.

Neither Ebola nor HIV can be transmitted through the air, which means that people cannot get either disease simply by sitting near someone who is infected – in an airplane, for example.

If the two viruses are so similar, why have we become so accepting of one, and so frantic about the other? Perhaps the answer lies in our innate fear of the unknown. Ebola, a rapid killer, is new to Western culture, and there is still much to learn. The unknown creates great anxiety, which feeds the media frenzy.

Everyone involved with the hospitality industry is now wondering if this threat will affect our business. Will airports be shut down? Will travel be restricted? Will people be afraid to fly? According to what we know, and what respected organizations like the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) tell us, the answers really ought to be “no.” Because of the way Ebola is transmitted (by direct contact with bodily fluids), the risk of its being transmitted between travelers is, as with HIV, practically zero. But when every major news outlet is running front-page stories for days on end about a possible worldwide Ebola pandemic, the travel and hospitality industry is certainly at risk. The next few weeks should prove to be very interesting.