

August 5, 2014

This is Erin Dunn of the Fortuna Chamber of Commerce with a Community Comment.

I was scheduled to leave today with a group heading to Liberia that would be providing surgical repair for cleft palates and cleft lips. The group is Rotaplast -- a Rotary sponsored organization that sends out about 10 international missions a year made up of both medical and non-medical volunteers.

I was over the moon excited about the trip. I had long wanted to join a Rotaplast mission and I had this small window of time in August that I could go, and wow—I was offered a trip during that time. I was updating my shots, reading up on Monrovia and telling anyone who would listen that I was going on a Rotaplast mission.

In mid-June, administrators decided to postpone the trip due to the Ebola outbreak.

I have a couple of observations about this experience.

The first is that coverage on the Ebola crisis was top news when I was out of the country in late May. We were barely getting blips about it on the news in the States. I started wondering then if that was something that would impact the Rotaplast trip. When I returned home the news here still wasn't covering it like they were abroad. Which made me think that in the time it took me to fly home the outbreak was under control.

That wasn't the case. Our stateside media coverage started catching up to the world coverage and I began thinking we might not go. Then the call came that the trip had been postponed.

My second observation is that while I understood the decision—better safe than sorry—I fully expected the outbreak to be dealt quickly and that by the time we would have gone on the trip, it would be under control. I was thinking we'd be armchair quarterbacking by the end of July—that while on the one hand we were glad for the precaution, but wasn't it too bad we hadn't kept the plans because the outbreak had been under control since mid-July.

Boy was I wrong. In this age of advanced medical technology, I fully expected the Ebola disaster to be dealt with and over in a matter of weeks. Even when it was happening in rural areas where medical equipment and medicine is lacking. Even though it's highly contagious. Even when there wasn't encouraging news. But this is 2014, there is no need for medical scares. Right?

My final observation is that this outbreak brought on memories of the early AIDS epidemic: Misinformation – like thinking that it was an airborne disease. Fear – Liberians putting off going to the doctor or hospital thinking Ebola would be more easily contracted there. No vaccine – so no one is immune.

Humanity is fragile. Humanity has limitations. Humanity never gives up.

This has been Erin Dunn from the Fortuna Chamber of Commerce.