

Outbreak

The alarm clock rang and, at its sound, I sprang from my bed. Today was the start of a new journey- I had been assigned to a research team studying the outbreak of a new and extremely virulent disease in the jungles of South America. Villages were plagued by its presence and fatality from the symptoms was on the rise. Young and old, weak and strong were falling victim to its wrath- no one was spared. Our team of investigators had been summoned to collect data and attempt to find the source of the disease in hopes of finding a treatment. Would we be successful? Questions raced through my mind as I frantically finished packing for the 3 month sabbatical. Downstairs, the taxi honked furiously- I was running later than I thought! As I hurriedly fumbled down the stairs, the excitement of what the next few weeks would hold continued to mount. The flight left in 15 minutes- would we make it to the airport? Had I remembered my passport? Did I remember to unplug the iron? The taxi driver was rather polite as he heeded my urgency. He did, however, seem to be lacking in basic personal hygiene. As we reached the airport, he extended his hand to wish me well. Must I really return the favor? Reluctantly, I grasped his hand and gave a firm handshake (**stop here**: have the students complete their first exchange), thanked him for his services and rushed towards the check in counter. We had arrived at the airport in plenty of time and I was soon seated on the plane. Much to my dismay, a rather precocious 6-year old with a raging case of the common cold was seated beside me. I soon remembered how inquisitive little children can be. Continually leaning over my computer, asking "what's that"- would I get a moment's peace?! Suddenly the child stopped and reared her head back and let out an enormous sneeze- all over ME! (**stop reading**: Have students complete their second exchange). Frustrated beyond belief with the situation (especially with the importance of my journey weighing on my shoulders), I moved to a seat at the rear of the plane to conclude my flight in peace. Once on firm ground, I hustled through the international airport in Ecuador, South America. I soon found the convoy transporting all of the researchers to the depths of the Ecuadorian jungles. Several hours later, we arrived. The condition of the village was much worse than we had anticipated. Only a handful of villagers were healthy enough to care of the rest. In all, 64 of the 97 villagers were ill. 10 died the first night of our stay. We soon realized the urgency of our work. With the additional work of our team, the condition of the village soon stabilized but our search for answers was failing. What was causing this outbreak? One evening, a young man from the village and I sat pondering the condition of the village on the bank of a small stream. We told stories of our lives, laughed, and shared a canteen of a drink made by the men of the village (**stop here**: Have students complete their last exchange). What would come of this village and the dozens of others like it falling victim to this outbreak? I, unfortunately, would never get to find out the outcome of my effort....