Ebola information for the public: an assessment of suitability and readability of information available through US, UK, Canada and European public health agencies

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Background
The epidemic of Ebola virus disease (EVD) has been declared an international public health emergency. Surveillance and strict observation of infection prevention and control measures, aided by public awareness regarding symptoms and prompt health care-seeking behavior, are essential to control Ebola. Public participation requires understandable information. Readability indicators measure the ease with which text can be read and understood.

As inadequate information has resulted in unfounded fear in non-EVD-affected countries, we review the readability of EVD public information available from websites of selected public health agencies in those areas.

Methods
Information sheets were downloaded on 1st September 2014 from CDC, PHE and Canada websites. Readability scores were obtained using software, and central tendency and dispersion measures calculated using Stata v10.1. Population literacy levels obtained from OECD^3

Results
Box 1 presents aggregated results for all websites analysed.

- CDC, PHE and Canada factsheets were ‘difficult to read’, requiring a US school grade of 12, and 17-18 years old reading age.
- The CDC page was ‘fairly difficult to read’, with a US school grade of 9, and 13-15 years old reading age.

Conclusion
Information on EVD provided on websites of different public health agencies is written at a higher than recommended reading level. A substantial proportion of citizens would have difficulty understanding such information, potentially hindering effective health-seeking behaviours, prolonging ineffective self-care strategies and perpetuating the stigma towards people with Ebola.

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