Hot Topics group discusses stemming viral outbreaks

By Zachary Jernigan
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"If 43 percent of Americans are very or somewhat worried about the possibility that someone in their immediate family might catch the Ebola virus, that is either due to their lack of information or their misinformation," Paula Donnelly Roark said.

She sat with her husband and three other locals in a Yavapai College Sedona Center classroom on Thursday, Feb. 19, taking part in another installment of Philosophy in the Public Interest Hot Topics Cafe — a Northern Arizona University program designed to foster public debate about controversial issues.

Thursday afternoon's discussion on "Environmental Change and Emerging Pandemics" had attracted several individuals whose experience spoke to the topic at hand.

According to Donnelly Roark and her husband, Phil Roark, over the course of 40 years the couple had visited nearly every country in Africa. Having seen the rise of AIDS in that continent and the continuing toll of malaria in undeveloped regions of the world, Donnelly Roark expressed a fear of Ebola and other diseases spreading not to the United States but to the poorest nations on Earth — namely, much of Africa.

"I think, as world citizens, we should be concerned about Ebola .... What responsibilities do we have to less wealthy countries?" she asked, but also added that the United States could become vulnerable if it did not manage its funds properly. "We have cut our own public health

JEFF DOWNARD, a professor in Northern Arizona University's Department of Philosophy lectures on "Environmental Change and Emerging Pandemics" at Yavapai College in West Sedona to a group holding a discussion about the effect of disease and conflicts on global quarantine issues.

that celebrating the achievements of health care workers would go a long way toward helping the cause of finding cures or enacting preventative measures.

Downard agreed, while

nations — the U.S., in particular — felt the risk to themselves was great enough.

"The amount we're spending has not changed all that much," he said.
"I worried about Ebola, but I'm not going to Africa," Mike Abrahamson, a former biology and microbiology teacher, said. He put a pencil down on the table before him, using it as an example of an inert virus. Many viruses' development cycles, he said, are a mystery and thus dangerous. "We don't know what turns them on ... But the Ebola virus — it turns on immediately."

Discussion leader Jeff Downard, a professor in NAU’s Department of Philosophy, countered this argument by pointing out that estimates of the rise of AIDS proved too conservative. According to him, viruses adapt quickly to their environment and their likely path of infection cannot be accurately predicted.

"One of my good friends works at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention," he said, adding that this friend had recently been tasked with tracking Ebola back to its source. "She said that the virus turned out to have changed."

The participants turned their attention to the role of healthcare workers in regions stricken by outbreaks of communicable disease, examining public perceptions of how well medical facilities are protecting people.

"All of these people are extraordinarily courageous, and we don't talk about them much," Donnelly Roark said, asserting