

EXCLUSIVE: MIRRORMAN ON THE EBOLA FRONT LINE

Layson couldn't give her son a last hug in case a stray tear infected him... We watch aghast as her body is thrown in a truck with 7 others



GEARED UP Mirror's Tom in protective suit outside isolation unit

By TOM PARRY

Reporting from the Elwa Isolation Clinic in Monrovia, Liberia

SEVEN days ago Oliver Wilson drove his sick, shivering wife Layson to an isolation clinic for suspected cases of Ebola.

The 33-year-old nurse, knew from her symptoms that she had contracted the world's most feared virus.

She knew also that she was about to die from the incurable disease.

But she had stopped short of telling Oliver. And she deliberately didn't hug their one-year-old son Oliver Junior as she walked alone through the quarantine tape surrounding the tin-roofed hospital unit.

Her fear that she could infect the tot through a drop of sweat or a stray tear was based on sound knowledge.

Yesterday grief-stricken Oliver wept and banged his head against the steering wheel of the family car as he watched Layson's body chucked unceremoniously on to the back of a truck in a white plastic bag.

He had been denied the chance to say goodbye to his childhood sweetheart.

In a macabre scene, the corpses of seven other Ebola victims - including a six-year-old boy - were loaded on to the flatbed lorry.

I looked on aghast as grimly determined mortuary workers, clad head to toe in protective clothing, tipped Layson's corpse off a stretcher - like earth from a wheelbarrow.

HERE in the hellish Ebola zone of West Africa, the victims' remains have to be cremated quickly as even the dead are contagious.

This is the heart-breaking drudgery of life in disease-racked Liberia, where the worst outbreak of this violent disease in history claims fresh lives daily.

The World Health Organisation admitted that the official death toll of 1,145 in the region "vastly underestimates the magnitude of the outbreak".

For Oliver, a former UN aid worker, the swiftness of his beautiful wife's decline remains impossible to understand.

Speaking through bursts of stifled sobs, he details with amazing clarity how Layson went down with the incredibly contagious Ebola virus. I talk



TRAGIC Layson with husband Oliver and son

to Oliver from outside the cab of his 4x4 vehicle where he sits - through fear of getting too near to him.

My instinct would be to offer a sympathetic hand, but I have been told about the risks of getting too close to someone who might have embraced his Ebola-stricken wife 10 days before.

"I'm trying to be strong, but it's so hard," Oliver, 36, stammered. "She died on Saturday; yesterday evening.

"She caught Ebola at work, at the Catholic Hospital here in Monrovia. The hospital administrator had got ill.

"He tested positive for Ebola.

"It was my wife's job to give him an ECG examination, to put the pads on his body.

She knew she had to put plastic gloves on, but for a few seconds she was touching him with her hands, to help him get off the bed and on to a chair. That is how she got it. A few days later, that man died.

"It was on August 3, when we came home from church, that she complained of shivering, of feeling chilly."

Oliver explained how Layson was determined not to be a burden, and so tried to get better with medicine she bought from a local chemist. The middle-class couple, who wed in 2007, had always been active, outgoing members of the community.

Four years ago, they used their savings for a dream holiday in the United States, and Layson hankered after another trip abroad.

He proudly showed me a photograph of Layson on his mobile phone.

He snapped her posing in a snowbound

street, a treasured memento. Layson desperately didn't want to be ill. She entered nursing in 2005, and had been promoted several times to obtain a senior position.

AFTER Oliver lost his job at the UN, she became the family's breadwinner. Now he has no idea how he will support their son.

"On the Monday evening she said she was too hot," Oliver continued. "She wanted cold water on a towel to put on her forehead. By Wednesday she had lost her appetite. On Thursday the weakness had got worse and she told me she felt nauseous.

"It was last Saturday that she became really ill. It was our son's first birthday.

"She slept in the living room because I think she knew what was happening to her.



DEADLY CARGO Aid worker in protective suit puts body on truck yesterday



GRIM TASK Aid worker tips body into truck outside isolation clinic



PERILOUSLY CLOSE Unprotected guards talk as the work goes on



WAITING FOR NEWS Relatives check their phones outside the unit

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PICTURES by Rowan Griffiths

She said, 'Oliver, don't touch me.' She couldn't touch Oliver Junior either, and she had to stop breastfeeding him instantly because it is contagious through all body fluids.

"She was so weak she couldn't even sing Happy Birthday to our son."

The symptoms Oliver described chart the classic, rapid downfall in healthy people caused by debilitating Ebola.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control said Ebola started with fever, muscle

aches, weakness, headaches and sore throat. The next stage is often characterised by vomiting, diarrhoea, rash and malfunction of the liver and kidneys.

Worst of all, some patients have severe internal and external bleeding and multiple organ failure.

Survival rates are less than 40%, and

there is no vaccine or treatment, although a trial is underway in Liberia.

That is why the capital Monrovia is currently gripped by paranoia and suspicion over the spread of the disease.

"I brought her here later that day, eight days ago," Oliver said, as we wait outside the clinic for his wife's final journey.

"Within a week she was dead. I never got a chance to say goodbye. I could only speak on the phone. The last time we spoke, she told me her heart had stopped beating too fast.

"She said, 'Don't worry, I'll be fine.' Now I am here to watch her be carried out in a bag." The unemotional profes-

sionalism of the Red Cross workers hired to dispose of Ebola bodies is a shocking sight. For Oliver, it must be unimaginably painful. Security guards in front of the desperately overcrowded unit continue to chat while the bodies are loaded.

ONE woman laughed loudly, seemingly oblivious to the grim loading up process taking place behind her.

Throughout Monrovia there are huge advertising hoardings warning people of the dangers. Yet in the filthy slums, many seem to be going about their Sunday afternoon business as normal.

Torrential rain fell all day, turning the shanty town tracks into a putrid quagmire. It must be the ideal breeding

ground for a virus so contagious a quick touch on the arm from a sufferer is apparently enough to spread it.

By the time you know you should have been more careful, it might already be too late. Wracked by the loss of his beloved wife, Oliver also feared that he too might have Ebola.

Incubation can take up to 21 days. "I might have it," Oliver admitted. "I feel fine now, but it is very likely. Until she got Ebola, I didn't understand how scary it is. Now I'm terrified for our son too."

As the back panel on the truck carrying Layson's body was slammed shut, Oliver shuddered.

A disease he had not heard of six months ago has ruined his life in less than a fortnight.

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SICKNESS THAT IS INVISIBLE AND INCURABLE: PAGES 6&7



HAPPY FAMILY Oliver junior and jobless dad Oliver face bleak future after death of Layson