

HEALTH & MONEY

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By Suzanne M. Akian

In light of the growing health concerns surrounding the spread of the Zika Virus, now might be a good time to ask: What are the investment implications for our state's pharmaceutical industry?

Though it's been around for years, the recent global outbreak of the Zika virus is alarming to many. In the United States, there are over 100 reported cases of travel-related infections and now dozens of new cases that are thought to be sexually transmitted. New Jersey officials have voiced their concern, especially after the World Health Organization (WHO) set off global warnings and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued similar cautionary statements.

According to WHO scientists' predictions, there will be as many as three to four million new infections in the Americas this year, including in the southern United States. Recently, President Obama asked Congress for nearly \$2 billion in emergency funding to aid in and expedite the development of a Zika vaccine., And as it did during the Ebola outbreak in 2014, the WHO pledged to accelerate the research process on new drugs. At the moment, there is no vaccine or cure.

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As they did with Ebola, bird flu, swine flu, SARS and other outbreaks of deadly viruses that caused world health crises, American businesses and industry have a long history of addressing emerging needs and responding accordingly – and such could be the case now, especially in New Jersey, the home of more pharmaceutical and medical technology companies than any other state. Even a modest

amount of research can identify those New Jersey companies leading the way in solving this and other major health problems.

Dealing with medical crises like Zika, and generating vaccines or curative drugs requires research, much of which the Garden State can provide. Researchers will need devices to handle, swab, test and dispose of bodily fluid samples. Other researchers will need specialized labs to study the mosquitos, a species of which are the carriers of the virus, themselves.

While more than 121,000 people were employed in New Jersey's pharmaceuticals, biotech R&D and medical devices industries in 2013, that number may rise depending on the united States' response to a given health crisis.

New Jersey, by any measurement, has a robust labor force with enough skilled workers to meet employers' needs, which could boost not only the labor force and the economy, but an employer's bottom line as well.

The potential reach of the resources needed to fight world health epidemics like Zika and other diseases is enormous. Besides needing to develop and manufacture rapid diagnostic blood tests and viable vaccines, pharmaceutical companies will need to offer medicines to work against the symptoms. In the case of Zika, that means acetaminophen recommended for treating fevers and ophthalmological drops for conjunctivitis.

But even before the development of a cure, there is the need for prevention – meaning producers of Environmental Protective Agency-registered insect repellants will be in a good position in future, as will companies that manufacture mosquito nets and perhaps even those that make fans and air conditioners, since they dispel mosquitos too.

The Zika scare reveals not only a serious and immediate need for responses to any deadly virus, but also highlights the potential for increased employment and perhaps even investment opportunities.

American industry and initiatives have always responded to challenges, whether social, medical or military, and it is clear that American know-how and inventiveness can respond when needed.

On an individual level, investors can make a global impact too, by embracing equities related to the battle against the Zika virus.

New Jersey is perfectly positioned to take up the challenge.

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