Perspective Piece

Rethinking the Discharge Policy for Ebola Convalescents in an Accelerating Epidemic

Tim O’Dempsey, S. Humarr Khan,† and Daniel G. Bausch*

Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, Liverpool, United Kingdom; Kenema Government Hospital, Ministry of Health and Sanitation, Sierra Leone; Tulane University Health Sciences Center, New Orleans, Louisiana; U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit No. 6, Lima, Peru

Abstract. The outbreak of Ebola virus disease (EVD) in West Africa has outstripped available resources. Novel strategies are desperately needed to streamline operations. The present norm of requiring negative results on polymerase chain reaction for EVD convalescent patients to be discharged is not evidence-based and often results in asymptomatic patients competing for beds in dangerously crowded Ebola Treatment Units, posing risks to ward staff and patients and the community if infected persons are turned away. We summarize the relevant data and call for a change in discharge criteria for convalescent patients that can safely help reduce the strain on resources and direct energies where they are most needed. In the longer term, research is needed to establish evidence-based criteria and guidelines for discharge.

The outbreak of Ebola virus disease (EVD) in West Africa has been declared a public health emergency of international concern by the World Health Organization (WHO), in large part because the scale of the outbreak has outstripped available resources. We believe that a change in the discharge policy for convalescent patients can help reduce the strain on resources and direct energies where they are most needed.

In the last 15 years mobile laboratories have been routinely installed in epidemic areas to perform diagnostic testing for EVD by testing of blood by real-time polymerase chain reaction (PCR). With the assay at hand, patient discharge criteria of being asymptomatic for 3 days and testing PCR negative has become the norm. In our experience providing patient care at Ebola Treatment Units (ETUs) in Sierra Leone and Guinea during this outbreak, the interval between a patient becoming asymptomatic and testing PCR negative varies widely. In many cases completely asymptomatic convalescent patients wait days or even weeks to be released, either because their PCR result remains positive, often at a very low level, or simply because the laboratory is too over-run with samples from suspected new cases to perform the assay on the convalescents. Meanwhile, in many ETUs suspected cases are being turned away because of a critical shortage of beds; we faced this situation in the ETU at Kenema Government Hospital, Sierra Leone, in July 2014, when ~25% of the official bed capacity was occupied by asymptomatic but PCR-positive patients, usually very ill, which was extremely hazardous for staff and patients, deterring EVD cases from being admitted to the Kenema ETU, creating a backlog of EVD-confirmed cases in peripheral holding units, which necessitated diversion of cases to the already over-crowded ETU run by Medicine Sans Frontières in neighboring Kailahun District.

In addition to the operational challenges caused, there is little justification of the PCR-negative requirement on scientific grounds. The viral load in EVD closely parallels the clinical status and is thus logically very low in asymptomatic persons. In contrast, symptomatic patients, particularly when severely ill, have high viral loads and are very infectious, posing a far greater community transmission threat. No secondary transmission was noted in a study of 152 household contacts of 29 convalescent EVD patients followed for 21 months after illness. All 481 specimens (85 tears, 84 sweat, 79 feces, 95 urine, 86 saliva, 8 semen, 44 vaginal secretions) taken from the convalescent patients during this challenge. To reduce the community “viral load” and optimize use of limited bed and laboratory capacity, we recommend that convalescent patients should be discharged if asymptomatic for 48 hours and independently mobile, with appropriate counseling regarding possible infection risk and a basic discharge kit for infection control. This approach will have the additional benefit of enabling already constrained EVD testing laboratories to focus primarily on testing of new cases, thereby increasing the rate at which EVD PCR-negative suspect cases are identified and discharged, reducing the risk of ward-based EVD transmission to these individuals and freeing up additional beds. More conservative policies requiring blood or even urine to be reverse transcription-PCR (RT-PCR) negative before discharge may be maintained in centers and laboratories where capacity remains sufficient to perform such testing without unduly impacting the flow of patients. In the longer term, research is needed to establish evidence-based criteria and guidelines for safe discharge. This research must include collection of a wide range of bodily fluids from convalescent EVD patients and the testing of
samples by both RT-PCR and, importantly, cell culture to detect infectious virus.

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Authors’ addresses: Tim O’Dempsey, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, Liverpool, UK, E-mail: Tim.ODempsey@lstmed.ac.uk. Daniel G. Bausch, Tulane University Health Sciences Center, New Orleans, LA, E-mail: dbausch@tulane.edu.

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