Annex 19. Protocol for the reintegration of returning patients into their families and their community

The successful reintegration of survivors requires in-depth dialogue with the families and village chiefs prior to their return to the community. Their return to the community means that they were successfully treated and are no longer infectious and will not spread the disease to family members or others within the community.

1. Hospital discharge of Ebola or Marburg patients

The doctor in charge of the care unit must examine the patient before declaring them fit to leave hospital. Once the laboratory diagnostic tests shows that antibodies are developed and they no longer have an active infection, the doctor can release the patient. Recovering patients are no longer contagious to others and their return home or transfer to a general hospital is safe. Upon discharge, the patient should be given a medical certificate stating that they no longer pose a risk to relatives or neighbours.

Before the patient leaves the care unit:

- The cleaning staff must clean and disinfect all the patient’s personal belongings.
- Blankets and sheets MUST NOT be taken away by the patient. The care unit must provide the patient with new blankets and sheets if they brought their own to the hospital.
- The relatives must provide clothes for the patient to wear when leaving the care unit. The patient’s clothes should be cleaned using appropriate infection control procedures at the hospital and will be returned to them the following day.
- On discharge, patients must follow the doctor’s instructions.

2. Once the patient is back home

After recovery, the patient may feel tired for a period of up to two months. It is important that the patient:

- Get plenty of rest.
- Eat a varied diet (for example bread, vegetables, fruit, meat, beans).
- Drink plenty of water to rehydrate.

If the patient becomes ill, especially if they have a fever, they should go to a health centre immediately to have a check-up and receive treatment.

Warning: Male patients must be informed that their sperm may still be contagious for a period of three months after leaving hospital and Ebola or Marburg may be transmitted during sexual intercourse. During that period, the patient must either abstain from sex or use condoms. The medical team must provide a sufficient supply of condoms. This warning must be stated on the medical certificate issued on release.

The patient returning home may be given certain items (food, bedding, clothes, lamps, machetes) to compensate them for the loss of personal belongings that were destroyed during disinfection and to help them to rebuild their life. Before implementing this strategy, careful evaluation is in order, because these donations may stigmatize the patient and generate envy.

Experience in the field has shown that survivors of Ebola and Marburg are often stigmatized. Intensive public education campaigns are needed to reduce stigma. For measures to address stigmatization, see Annex 21.