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New HIV treatment cost worries health experts

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KAMPALA. Although Uganda started the potent combination antiretroviral (ARV) therapy for treatment of HIV in 2004 that remarkably reduced HIV-related mortality, the increasing emergence of drug resistance, could challenge this achievement, health workers have warned.

Health workers in Uganda say the growing threat could undermine the national progress in treating and preventing HIV infection if early and effective action is not taken.

Studies across the country indicate that patients with HIV on second-line ARV treatment are significantly experiencing treatment failure and are likely to return to Aids "death row" for lack of drugs.

Dr Flavia Matovu Kiweewa, an epidemiologist and microbicides researcher at Makerere University - John Horpkins University (MUJHU), said the lack of access to third-line treatment to HIV/Aids in rural treatment centres, leaves millions of poor people in danger.

"Failure by government to provide affordable third-line treatment for HIV/Aids patients in rural areas who have turned resistant to second-line treatment further threatens treatment scale-up of the pandemic," said Dr Matovu.

According to a study "Signal off 2013", Uganda has very high level of primary HIV/Aids drug resistance of 11.3 per cent, which is strongly associated with virological failure and acquisition of more mutations.

Mr Moses Nsubuga, an HIV positive activist, said he first tested in 1994 and started ARVs in 1998 but by 2000, he developed resistance to the drugs and was switched to second line of treatment to survive.

"I used to buy the ARVs at Shs50,000 and when I developed resistance, I have been switched to the second line treatment; Protease Inhibitor and Aluvia that costs me Shs250,000 monthly," Mr Nsubuga said last week.

He said although second-line treatment for HIV/Aids is at every treatment centre in the country, the third-line is only at Joint Clinical Research Centres in Kampala.

Dr Henry Mugerwa, the head of Research at JCRC-Lubowa, said a study done at JCRC Lubowa in Kampala four years ago found out that about 308 patients at the treatment centre experienced treatment failure on their second-line regimen within three years.

"Although the 308 patients are lined up for third-line treatment, it is not available and it costs between Shs650,000 to Shs750,000 per month which is very expensive for an average Ugandan," said Dr Mugerwa

The Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Health, Dr Diana Atwine, said government provides free drugs for first and second line regimens for treatment countrywide and asked health workers to ensure that all the patients benefit.

Shs650,000

Cost. The minimum amount of money needed for drugs every month for a person living with HIV/Aids who is on third-line treatment.

She also said government was providing effective HIV drugs and valuable adherence support at all treatment centres in the country.

She added that the third-line treatment is also in the country although it is yet to circulate to rural treatment centres.

"As a country, we still have a high disease burden and we are putting more emphasis on prevention as work towards our goal of ending HIV/Aids. We ask the patients to adhere to a prescribed treatment plan. We are also sensitising and educating our people on how to take the medicine as prescribed by the doctors," Dr Atwine said.



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