THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2018
Daily Monitor
WWW.MONITOR.CO.UG

Cancer on the rise among children - health officials

Cases. About 7,000 children are estimated to develop cancer every year in Uganda, according to experts.

BY FRANKLIN DRAKU & TOM MALABA
editorial@ug.nationmedia.com

KAMPALA. In 2010, when Joel Kabanda was diagnosed with cancer of the blood, his mother, Ms Mary Nakuganda, was devastated. Her husband and relatives advised her to seek treatment from traditional herbalists.

"I rejected the demand from my relatives and opted to go to hospital. From Masaka, I was referred to Uganda Cancer Institute [UCI] at Mulago [in Kampala] where my son was treated for five years," she said.

Nakuganda says, at the institute, she was attended to by Dr Fadhil Geriga and Dr Joyce Balagadde, who encouraged her to ensure her child completes his medication.



Checkup. A doctor examines Joel Kabanda, a cancer survivor, at the Uganda Cancer Institute in Mulago yesterday.

PHOTO BY STEPHEN WANDERA

Successful treatment

Three years later, Kabanda is healthy again after being completely cured of cancer. The eight-year-old is now beaming with happiness and ready to move on with his life.

"I am very grateful to the institute because they have cured my child. I am a Christian and I will continue to pray to God for the good health for my son," she said.

Kabanda is among the hundreds of children who have successfully received treatment for cancer from the UCI and got cured.

His case is not an isolated one. Uganda is registering an increasing number of children suffering from childhood cancer, with the latest figures showing that the country records 7,000 new cases every year.

As Uganda joins the rest of the world to mark World Childhood Cancer Day today, officials from UCI say the trend is worrying, because little information is available about the causes of cancer in children.

But the officials say though not much information is available on the causes, the disease is curable among children. Dr Joyce Balagadde Kambugu, the head of paediatric oncology at UCI, says cancer in children is threatening to overtake other infections as one of the highest causes of deaths among children.

55%

Cure rate. Childhood cancer is curable and has a cure rate of 55 per cent in Uganda while in developed countries, it stands at more than 80 per cent.

"Currently, about 3,000 children are diagnosed with HIV infections every year while 7,000 children are estimated to develop cancer every year," she says.

Dr Kambugu also says most of the children suffer from kidney, bone, blood cancers and cancer of the lymph nodes.

She says only less than 10 per cent of the number of those developing cancer receive treatment at the cancer institute.

"The cancer institute received only 512 referrals of children with cancer in 2017, up from 476 in 2016. We do not know where the rest of the children are, meaning they maybe outside there dying," Dr Kambugu says.

She blames the low treatment rate to delayed referrals of children with cancer from the lower health units and hospitals, inconsistent access to cancer drugs and prohibitive costs of travel to access specialised paediatric cancer care.

Appeal

"There is nothing scarier than realising that your child has cancer. However, there is nothing more tragic than knowing that treatment and cure does exist for your particular child's cancer and their excellent outcomes, but that it is not available for your child," Dr Kambugu says.

"It is time to stop this cruel atrocity... make your voices heard on the international childhood cancer day and demand from the leaders to act and help save all children," she adds.

Dr Balagadde says unlike in adults where the disease cannot be cured, childhood cancer is curable and has a cure rate of up to more than 80 per cent in developed countries, while in Uganda, the success rate stands at 55 per cent.

However, she said Uganda's success rate is one of the highest in the Sub-Sahara Africa and is improving.

She attributes the improvements to a dedicated team at the paediatric oncology.

Dr Jackson Orem, the executive director of UCI, said through equipping the unit with the best facilities, the country can effectively deal with childhood