

Fingerprint technology improves care, support for HIV/AIDS patients

By Hope Mafaranga

Among the interventions technology is spearheading is monitoring the viral load of people who are already on the antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) to see how they are coping with treatment and if the virus in their bodies has been suppressed.

According to scientists, a low or suppressed viral load will lead to the prevention of new HIV infections, improve the health quality of people living with HIV and reduce HIV mortality.

Chris Byaruhanga, the Kabarole district biostatistician, said the technology will also help determine the actual number of people living with HIV/AIDS.

He said in 2016, the health ministry placed Kabarole HIV prevalence rate at 15%, which was much higher than the national level of 6.7%.

"The facilities using fingerprint technology have been interlinked, which is necessary to accurately monitor the clinical progression of HIV-positive patients longitudinally," he said.

Charity Kyomugisha, the monitoring and evaluation technical support (METS) deputy programmes manager, said they have been able to eliminate double testing of people and hope the technology will go a long way in fighting drug resistance among people living with HIV.

Kyomugisha said it will now be easy to followup patients who have been in care from one health facility to another and also track down those who are having adherence to treatment challenges.

"We have heard of people



One of the people living with HIV pressing her fingerprint on the machine used to track her treatment in Kabarole district. Photo by Hope Mafaranga

testing from one health centre and going to another one to get treatment, while others abandon their treatment and deceive their new health providers that they have not been on treatment. The technology will sort all this out," she added.

Edgar Kansime, the HIV case based surveillance co-ordinator, said people living with HIV who lose their cards, will have no cause for alarm as the technology is able to

identify the patients' medical records.

"People who misplace their medical cards should not fear to come for their next appointment. All they need is their fingerprint and the records will automatically be retrieved," he said.

However, Dr Hudson Baliddawa from the health ministry, clarified that the new technology will not entirely eliminate paperwork, but only reduce it, which he said will

also save the Government expenses on stationery.

"We will use less paper for backup purposes, just in case the Internet is down or in case of an emergency, so that our patients do not miss their treatment," he said.

Integration

Dr Eddie Mukooyo, a commissioner in the health ministry, said the fingerprint technology will be integrated into the Uganda Electronic

Medical Records System (UgandaEMR).

UgandaEMR is an application which enables the design of a customised medical records system with no programming knowledge, although medical and systems analysis knowledge is required.

Mukooyo said UgandaEMR was approved by the Ministry of Health Patient Electronic Medical Records System, currently running in 600 health facilities across the country.

The country has 6,408 facilities, including public facilities, private for-profit and private not-for-profit facilities.

Mukooyo said the health ministry has set a target of 1,000 health facilities to be running UgandaEMR by the end of March 2018.

BETWEEN THE LINES:

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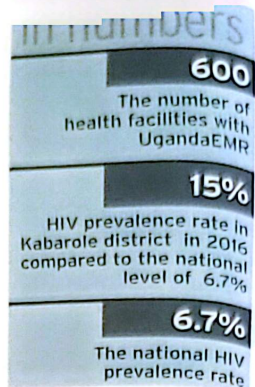
"With support from METS and other partners, the ministry has customised UgandaEMR to include the tuberculosis (TB) data entry forms, maternal and child health (MCH) forms and registers," he said.

Capacity building

To quicken the integration progress, the ministry, METS and other partners gathered at Lake View Hotel in Mbarara district recently and trained a cadre of UgandaEMR expert trainers and users across the country.

"We are training biostatisticians, record-keepers and other health workers to upgrade, troubleshoot, use UgandaEMR and extend UgandaEMR to all health facilities," Mukooyo said.

He also said the cadres will be able to provide hands-on training and build capacities for their colleagues to support the rollout of the updated version of UgandaEMR.



"Trained personnel are expected to pass on the knowledge to others so that we have a force of well-equipped, knowledgeable people to roll it out at all district levels. We want Ugandans to get comprehensive health services," he added.

Kansime explained that the system will also help Uganda achieve the 90-90-90 UNAIDS Sustainable Goal by 2020.

"The system will help us to achieve the goal of having all people know their HIV status, all people diagnosed with HIV getting treatment while all people receiving antiretroviral therapy (ART) will have viral suppression by 2020," Kansime said.

He said their target is to have 1,195,742 clients on ART from 1,476 ART facilities, with the majority of these clients from health centre IIIs, IVs and general hospitals across the country.

Seventy-seven per cent of facilities are government owned, with 67% of targeted clients and the high-volume facilities the priority for the EMR rollout.

"The ministry is targeting the roll out to cater for non-ART facilities so that they can use UgandaEMR in the subsequent years," he said.

Kansime also said the technology generates reports directly automatically. This enables health workers to make monthly, quarterly and annual reports easily and has improved accurate and timely reporting.

"Imagine each time a health worker was to make reports, they had to go back to the register. It was time-consuming and needed more manpower. But with the new technology, it is becoming more sufficient and effective to make reports that for policy and decision making to the health ministry," he added.

VOICES

Fredrick Kakoraki, Kitoba sub-county: It will minimise the duplication of cases and provide accurate data generated locally to fill in the national data.



Irene Ahaisibwe, Kabarole female youth councillor: It is time-saving and helps health workers to give prescription on HIV with the right information.



Francis Kazini, Kizirangumbi sub-county: Clients who lose their documents will now get their drug prescription basing on valid electronic information.

