

JOINT CLINICAL RESEARCH CENTRE

New Vision
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JCRC factfile

JCRC was started in 1991 in Mengo and was the first The President's Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) grantee. It was the first centre providing treatment for HIV in Africa, when it started over 100,000 pioneer patients on ARVs.

Since then, JCRC has participated in most of the research that informed the way AIDS is treated today.

"We have done research on the best combination for patients beginning treatment and also for those failing on their treatment," Kityo says.

The centre also pioneered the HIV vaccine in Uganda and Southern Africa and has continued with other research studies on HIV treatment.

"The centre is also one of the international sites involved in research to find the best protocol for drug resistant HIV. This research will inform the way drug-resistant HIV is diagnosed and treated," Mugenyi says.

Kityo adds that with support from the European Union, the centre developed formulations for children with HIV that are being used not only in Uganda, but are part of the World Health Organisation pediatric recommendations.

JCRC was among the seven centres selected by Gilead, a prominent pharmaceutical company for its studies.

"We are also part of the HIV cure research. So besides treating HIV, we are putting emphasis on curing HIV in the developing world," Kityo says.

In addition to research on HIV, JCRC is also doing research on cardiac diseases, such as hypertension in children and rheumatic heart disease. Others are malaria, dentistry and zoonotic diseases which constitute part of the emerging diseases such as bird flu.

Today, JCRC has established centres in Gulu, Fort Portal, Mbale, Kabale, Kakira, Rushere, Kapchorwa and the Sese Islands.



Mugenyi (second-right), Kityo, Nkalubo (left) and Fred Byaruhanga (right) showing the Certificate of Accreditation from the College of American Pathologists. Photo by Miriam Namutebi

JCRC gets CAP accreditation

By Jacqueline Emodok

The Joint Clinical Research Centre (JCRC) has been awarded the College of American Pathologists (CAP) accreditation in recognition of the quality of their laboratories.

"It is not only an honour for the centre, but also for Uganda as a country because we have a lab that meets international standards," Prof. Peter Mugenyi, the executive director of JCRC, says.

The accreditation makes the centre one of the first laboratories to be certified to conduct the biggest range of tests (50 tests) in Uganda.

What CAP accreditation entails
In order for a laboratory to receive the CAP accreditation, an institute has to submit an application to CAP in Chicago in the US.

Upon receipt of the application, CAP will first conduct an assessment to ensure that the laboratory adheres to various international standards that range from safety and buildings, to the competence of staff. These are compared to the best labs in the US, Europe and some countries in Africa affiliated to the College of Pathologists.

"They will not come to your laboratory, unless you give them

an indication that your laboratory meets basic requirements. The standards must be equal to the other highly established scientific structures," Mugenyi notes.

The CAP ascertains that an institution meets the basic requirements by initially sending questions to the institution on the laboratory performance. The questions seek to know what kind of quality check lists the laboratory conducts and whether they are being carried out independently by recognised organisations.

When the CAP reviews the institution and finds satisfactory results, then they communicate a date for inspection and this is done at a fee which caters for travel expenses for a three-man team.

On a set date, they carry out a thorough inspection of the institute and standard requirements such as the safety of the organisation, the buildings, adequate space for tests to be carried out and whether every reagent used in the lab is stored in its recommended condition.

"Some are stored under room temperature while others are kept at -20°C, some at -80°C degrees and even at liquid nitrogen temperatures," Mugenyi explains.

The inspection team also looks at the tests conducted in the institute, for example, if you conduct malaria tests, they want to see that you have standard operating procedure to carry out the tests.

According to James Nkalubo,

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the deputy director for laboratory services at JCRC, the laboratory is accredited to carry out over 50 tests, making it the largest test menu in the country.

The inspection also considers qualification of staff; they must first fulfill the Ugandan standards and be registered by the Allied Health Professionals Council.

"The standards of the laboratory staff are then compared to those outside there and should hold at least a bachelors degree. In addition, each level of supervision is inspected and an example is that the executive director should have the minimum of a PhD," Mugenyi says.

Dr Cissy Kityo Mutuluzza, the deputy executive director of JCRC, adds that staff members also have to undergo competence tests to ensure there is consistency in the laboratory

tests they do.

"We usually have online assessment courses which are done by an organisation from the UK (Ukneqas). They send us blinded samples three times a year and compare us to 7,000 other labs. Every test we do is externally certified," Nkalubo says.

Each laboratory scientist must be certified in the tests that he/she carries out.

What it means for Uganda

As its name suggests, the Joint Clinical Research Centre specialises in medical research through international partnerships with international institutions. The centre raises its own funds through competitions to acquire their research, however, in order to be competitive, JCRC must offer the best tests to researchers.

"Before any international grant for research is awarded, the first thing the awarding institute does is to establish that you meet the international standards of quality," Mugenyi says.

Therefore, with the CAP certification which is one of the highest accreditations a laboratory can achieve, JCRC will have a competitive edge over international institutions.

"People know who you are and they are sure of what you are able to achieve and the reliability of your results so that they can trust you with grants," Mugenyi explains.

Uganda will also be able to conduct research that will lead to various milestones in the country's health sector.

"On average, a research project for a new drug takes nine years and in terms of investment, it can cost hundreds of millions of dollars. At any stage in such an investment, people want to be sure that where the research is taking place and now Uganda offers that assurance," Mugenyi says.

Sustainability

Kityo notes that JCRC is already an international centre of excellence accredited by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United States National Institutes of Health. The CAP accreditation is currently the institution's peak achievement and it has elevated its profile. However, attaining this level of certification is not the ultimate objective but maintaining it.

"CAP does not give a blanket accreditation because every two years they return to check whether the lab has maintained the quality they found during their previous inspection. It is, therefore, going to be real hard work by the staff to maintain the standards," Mugenyi says.

Besides maintaining standards, CAP will also seek to establish that the laboratory has developed or adopted new techniques because science as a discipline is constantly evolving.