

By Vivian Agaba

The Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI) lacks sufficient pathologists. As result, it struggles to provide quality care and treatment to cancer patients.

A pathologist examines laboratory samples of body tissue to establish the disease. Currently, there are 30 pathologists countrywide.

Every year, the institute, which was granted an autonomous body by the Act of Parliament in 2014, receives 4,500 new cancer cases per year. Of these, 400 are reported among children, and accumulatively, it registers between 4,000-5,000 patient visits every year.

Dr Nixon Niyonzima, the head of training and research at UCI, said the institute has no pathologists of its own. It depends on only four specialists from Mulago hospital and Makerere University to cater for the overwhelming number of patients. The ratio of pathologists to patients in Uganda is 1:100.

Niyonzima explained that due to the limited number of pathologists, patient turnaround time becomes long.

"Diagnosis is the backbone of any treatment. We would want our patients to be diagnosed within 72 hours, and immediately started on treatment — depending on the type of cancer one has. But because of the limited number of pathologists, some patients spend weeks without being diagnosed. This is making it difficult for us to provide the best care for our patients," he said.

"As they wait to be diagnosed, the disease is multiplying. For us to be able to provide quality and up-to-standard care and treatment to cancer patients, we need about 28 pathologists

Cancer institute in dire need of pathologists



Orem (right) speaking to Stangenberg (left), Opendi (second-left) and Kelej at the cancer institute in Mulago Hospital yesterday. Photo by Godiver Asege

at the institute," he added.

He pointed out that at the institute, the commonest types of cancers among children are Burkitt lymphoma and acute leukemia. In women, it is breast and cervical cancer, while among men, prostate

cancer is the commonest.

He was addressing delegates from Merck Foundation, a Germany-based foundation that supports programmes designed to promote health and education in different African countries.

The delegation was led by the Minister of State for Health (general duties), Sarah Opendi. The team first toured the UCI and the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center at Mulago Hospital yesterday.

Uganda leads other EAC countries in cancer cases.

Opendi said there is need for continuous sensitisation about the disease, adding that cancer is curable as long as it is detected early and treated.

On the issue of limited

specialists, Opendi said as soon as the institute gets a board, they will discuss the issue of increasing the salaries of cancer experts, so that they are able to attract those who are abroad seeking greener pastures, to come back home and offer services.

The executive director of the institute, Dr Jackson Orem, said as the institute strives to be a centre of excellence in providing cancer care and treatment in East Africa and beyond, a lot of resources are needed to make the dream come true, among them, human resource capacity building and more infrastructure.

He called for more support from different partners to achieve this dream.

The chief executive officer of Merck Foundation, Dr Rasha Kelej, said the foundation through the Ministry of Health, is willing to support the institute in three areas — building capacity, providing training programmes for Ugandans in cancer research and training more oncologists.

The chairman of the executive board and family board of Merck Foundation, Prof. Dr Frank Stangenberg-Haverkamp, said he was impressed with the institute.

He said it is at the standard of European cancer facilities, with modern equipment.