

Health minister Opendi wants law on organ transplants

By Michael Odeng
and Joan Murungi

The state minister for health, Sarah Opendi, has asked the Government to pass the Organ Transplant bill into law.

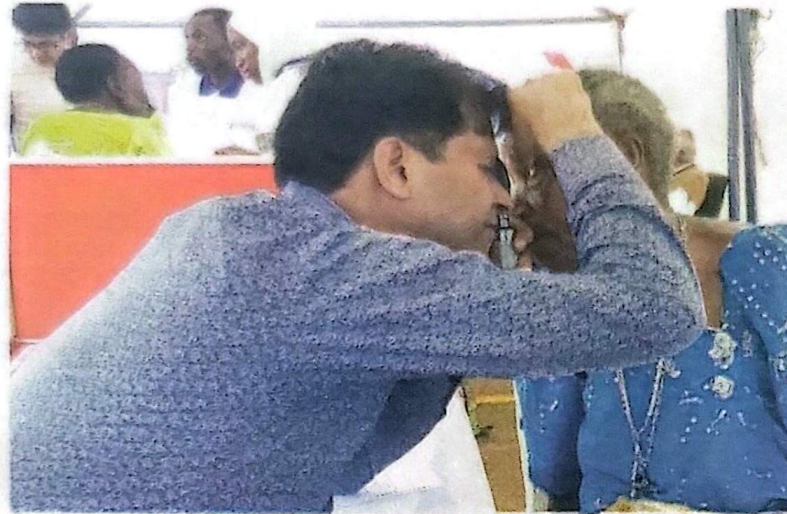
She made the call during the 13th free eye medical camp held at Banda, a Kampala suburb.

The camp's aim was to identify the major cause of visual impairment and blindness among the people with the view of offering treatment to them and also create awareness about preventive measures to reduce the risk of eye diseases.

During the camp, organised on July 9 by the North Indian Cultural Association (NICA) together with Ian Hutcheon Clinic for Children (IHCC) and Dr Dharmendra Agarwal's Eye Hospital, people with visual impairments were tested and also received free optical medicines and spectacles.

According to the World Health Organisation, nearly 50 people in the world are blind and an additional 135 million visually impaired people need support services.

Agarwal said 80% of the causes of blindness in developing countries



A member NICA, Yadan Kumar Anil, checking 78-year-old Margaret Luwugu in Banda, Kampala last week. Photo by Micheal Odeng

are as a result of infections, cataracts, glaucoma, trachoma and vitamin A deficiency.

Agarwal observed that many people in Uganda have cataracts in their eyes, which could eventually lead to blindness if not operated. According to Agarwal, it is expensive to import corneas to Uganda, which is why

having an eye bank in Uganda is a cheaper option.

Presiding over the camp in Banda, Opendi disclosed that the Organ Transplant Bill is being drafted by the health ministry, adding that if passed into law it will help to regulate the harvesting of body parts in the country.

BETWEEN THE LINES:

Minister Opendi said the Organ Transplant Bill, which is being drafted by the health ministry, will regulate the harvesting of body parts in the country.

She said the law will permit the removal, storage and transplant of human organs and tissues for therapeutic purposes.

"At the moment, you can make a will, especially victims of accidents, to have your body part removed before you die and donated to those who are living because the law has not yet been passed," she said.

"People are being buried with their eyes, yet they could leave them to the living," the minister said.

Opendi advised the residents to go for regular eye checkups in order not to get blind.

"As the Government, it is part of our responsibility to provide healthcare to our population, although we have few eye experts in the country," she said, adding that Uganda has less than 50 eye specialists.

Opendi said about 6% of Ugandans are disabled as a result of eye sight. Statistics, according to Opendi, show that the lifespan of people with poor eye sight is reduced by 10 years.

"We should collect eyes from dead people and store them in an eye bank so that they can help restore sight of the under privileged in community at affordable prices," said Agarwal.

The chief executive officer of Mogas, Geoffrey Rugazooru, said the drive helps them to give back to the community, besides paying taxes and creating employment for Ugandans.

Ibrahim Kizza, 68, who was diagnosed with an eye ailment, disclosed that he has spent seven years unable to read small letters. He was given reading spectacles.

"I thank the Indian organisation for offering us such services. These days when you go to government hospitals, they tell you they do not have medicine and you are forced to buy it," he said.

The mother of six-year-old Alfred Sebwatwa, who also received treatment, told *New Vision* that her son's eardrum had pus oozing out. Grace Tebusembo revealed that the problem with his son started when he was one-year-old.