

Experts want more cancer surgeons

By Cecilia Okoth
and Christine Nyangoma

For a long time, Dr Sheila Ndyabangi frequented health facilities to screen for cervical cancer. All tests turned out negative until October last year, when things began to change.

"I felt a push in my abdomen and decided to go to hospital for a thorough check-up. Whereas the doctor did not find any problem, he suggested that I carry out an MRI scan on my abdomen and back," Ndyabangi, a principal medical officer for mental health, narrated.

An MRI scan is a medical test that creates a detailed picture of organs and other structures inside the body. The scan showed that Ndyabangi had cancer that attacks the lining of the uterus. It was through a series of treatments in and out of the country, including the removal of her uterus, that she was declared cancer-free.

Ndyabangi narrated her ordeal at the launch of the East Africa (EA) gynaecologic oncology fellowship training programme at Protea Hotel Kampala on Wednesday.

According to Dr Anthony Okoth Ndiira, a gynaecologist and obstetrician at the Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI), for Uganda to effectively tackle the increasing cases of cancer, especially among women, it needs 3,000 surgeons.

The burden

Cancer of the cervix is the leading cause of cancer-related deaths in Uganda. In 2014, the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimated that 3,915 Ugandan women are diagnosed with cervical cancer annually, with 2,160 deaths. Of the 2,000 patients that receive radiotherapy at the UCI annually, 40% are cervical cancer patients. Other cancers that affect the female reproductive system include ovarian cancer (abnormal or cancerous cells develop in the ovaries), uterine, vaginal and vulvar cancer (a rare form of cancer that occurs in the tissues of the external female genitalia).

New intervention

Dr Jackson Orem, the director of UCI, said the new fellowship launched is intended



Director general health services Anthony Mbonye hands over books to Nabwire during the launch of the East African gynaecologic oncology fellowship training programme at Protea Hotel in Kampala. Photo by Maria Wamala

to train specialists in a variety of diagnostic techniques and management procedures such as surgery of the reproductive organs, radiation therapy and chemotherapy.

The programme is supported by UCI, Mulago National Referral Hospital, Makerere University College of Health Sciences and the health ministry.

Gynaecological oncology is a specialised field of medicine that focuses on cancers of the female reproductive system.

Dr Jane Namugga is the first and only certified gynaecologic oncologist in Uganda. However, there are other doctors who have trained but their certification is still pending. These include Dr. Okoth, Dr Carolyn Nakisige from UCI and Dr Judith Ajeani from Mulago.

Dr Orem said the institute is working with the Uganda Medical Central Practitioners Council to recognise these specialists.

"Upon completion of the course that lasts for two years, these specialists will be able

Statistics

Okoth Ndiira, a gynaecologist, said in Uganda between 0.4 and 1.57 surgeons work on an average of 100,000 people. In comparison to high-income countries that have between 37 and 95 surgeons per 100,000 people but are also still struggling with a backlog of cases, sometimes stretching for months, Okoth said Uganda would need more than 100 surgeons per 100,000 people.

to handle all cancers in women that were previously handled at the general level," he said, justifying the trips patients go for abroad to seek specialised treatment.

Two students will be sponsored annually. The first two are Dr Jerome Katumba and Dr Mariam Nabwire.

Ugar new

By Taddeo E
and Joan M

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