

Children with HIV/AIDS should know their status, say experts

KAMPALA

By Violet Nabatanzi

Martha Clara Nakato found out she was HIV positive when she was 14 years old. Her twin brother had asked her to take him to a health facility to have an HIV test. When they reached the hospital, she too, decided to take an HIV test- and that is when she found out she was HIV positive.

Nakato, 21, is Miss-Young Positives central region and a student at Kyambogo University studying a bachelor's degree in accounting and finance. She said her father had never disclosed to anyone about her status, not to even her family, because he was scared she could not live a normal life since she was the only child born with HIV.

Children living with HIV/AIDS should not go beyond 10 years without knowing their status, Dr Augustine Lubanga, the training manager of AIDS Healthcare Foundation - Uganda Cares, has said.

He said disclosure should begin as early as possible, adding that a child of three years could be given some information appropriate for that age.

Lubanga said it is the role of the parents and guardians to disclose to their children their HIV/AIDS status. He made the remarks during a debate organised for university students as part of efforts to engage youth in fighting HIV at Eureka Hotel on Friday.

"Our role as healthcare providers is to counsel the parents or guardians to

disclose to their children, but it is not our mandate to disclose," Lubanga said.

He added that Antiretroviral therapy (ART) is a lifelong treatment, and, therefore, a child needs to know why he or she is taking Antiretroviral drugs (ARVs).

According to the Children's Act, a child has a right to information and healthcare.

He added that a child who knows his/her status will remind himself to take ARVs, even when his parents or guardians are not around.

"People living with HIV/AIDS must understand everything pertaining to the disease because HIV can resist the ARVs if poorly taken," he emphasised.

Uganda has a predominately young population with adolescents constituting 24.3% of the population.

According to the Ministry of Health estimates for 2015, HIV incidence among adolescents remains high, estimated at 11.6%. The National HIV Strategic Plan 2015/16-2019/20 prioritises adolescents and young people by recognising the high burden of HIV among this age group.

Recently, the health ministry released new HIV/AIDS guidelines, announcing the new HIV prevention strategy of "Test & Treat". This means any person who tests HIV-positive is supposed to be enrolled on ART immediately without any other considerations.

This is in line with the World Health Organisation's global target of eliminating HIV/AIDS by 2030.