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Uganda has only 47 eye care specialists

Alarming. Experts warn of a crisis should the country fail to train more eye specialists in the near future.

BY IBRAHIM A MANZIL
imanzil@ug.nationmedia.com

KAMPALA. Uganda has about 47 eye care specialists to take care of its more than 36 million people, leading ophthalmologists have said.

This was revealed at the fifth annual scientific congress of the College of Ophthalmology of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa (COECSA) at Munyonyo Commonwealth Resort in Kampala on Thursday.

Ophthalmology involves treating eye diseases and vision-related complications.

Ms Sarah Opendi, the State minister for Health in charge of General Duties, said the country has "just about 47 ophthalmologists", but promised to recruit more in subsequent financial years.

> If 40 people [ophthalmologists] were to look after 40 million, it would be hard. We have to increase the number of ophthalmologists in the country and also challenge governments in the region [to increase] the number of ophthalmologists," DR IBRAHIM MATENDE, COECSA PRESIDENT

"Although the government structure does not have an opening for them (ophthalmologists), we shall work with the Ministry of Public Service to co-opt them," said Ms Opendi.

Ms Grace Ssali, the president of the Uganda Ophthalmology Society, who also doubles as the outgoing secretary general of COECSA, decried the low number of the specialists given the vast population that they have to provide services to, calling for immediate government action.

The outgoing COECSA president, Dr Ibrahim Matende, called on regional governments to act, saying there will be a crisis should they fail to train more ophthalmologists.

The Speaker of Parliament, Ms Rebecca Kadaga, who officiated at the function, vowed to stop the ministry of Finance from cutting the budget for health, which she said frustrates service delivery in the sector.

"I wanted to see the ministry of Finance so that they understand. When they sit in their offices they look at the papers and say cut this (budget), cut that. I want the minister to be here so that we can tell him straight to his face and you know that I am going to follow it up in Parliament," said Ms Kadaga.

Ms Kadaga and Parliament in general have had frosty relations with officials of the Ministry of Finance in the recent past. Parliament accuses Finance of not paying attention to the needs of people of Uganda.

At Munyonyo, Ms Kadaga said: "But I think the time will come when we shall grab that minister (Matia Kasaija) and make sure that he listens and does what is required for the people of Uganda."

Ms Kadaga vowed to "demand now for better services, better training and skilling of ophthalmologists in the country."

Ms Kadaga also presided over the handover of office from the outgoing leadership to Dr Kgao Logodi from South Africa, who will preside over the body. The three-day conference ended yesterday.

BACKGROUND

Earlier publication. *Saturday Monitor* reported a week ago that eye-related diseases are on the rise in Uganda, and 350,000 Ugandans are permanently blind, with the leading causes of blindness identified as cataract, trachoma and river blindness. This points to a dire need for eye-treatment specialists.

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