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Mulago can do without interns - Health ministry

Pronouncement. Permanent Secretary says the stand-in doctors are free to leave if they cannot keep up with the condition.

BY LILLIAN NAMAGEMBE
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KAMPALA. The government has not paid stipend to intern doctors for more than three months, a delay the parent Health ministry acknowledged and attributed to late funds' disbursement by the Ministry of Finance.

The ministry's Permanent Secretary, Dr Asuman Lukwago, said the delay is a general problem that also applies to interns in other upcountry government hospitals. He added that the interns will be paid once the Finance ministry disburses monies for the third-quarter of 2015/16 financial year, which was expected in January.

Dr Lukwago said the current high numbers of interns makes it difficult for the government to keep up its commitment, which is why they scrapped free housing.

"It is simple; those who are not satisfied are free to go away. We can always do without them but they would never be confirmed as doctors," Dr Lukwago told *Daily Monitor* in a phone interview last week.

There are about 850 intern doctors, 150 of them at Mulago National Referral Hospital alone, deployed for hands-on clinical experience at government medical facilities countrywide. The internship, which falls in the fifth year of study, is a pre-condition for one's confirmation as a qualified doctor in the country.

Mulago hospital spokesperson Enock Kusasira was non-committal on whether the hospital can do with or without the interns though he said he cannot dispute the pronouncement since Dr Lukwago also speaks for the hospital.

"I want to agree with the permanent secretary. By the time he pronounces himself, he knows everything in and

out. He is a medical doctor, "he said, adding: "It is the parent ministry, not the hospital, to provide allowances for the interns."

Our investigations show that the State has also scrapped provision of housing for the final year medical students which, coupled with delayed pay of the allowances, has made life miserable for the interns.

"It is simple, those who are not satisfied are free to go away. We can always do without them, but they would never be confirmed as doctors," DR ASUMAN LUKWAGO, PERMANENT SECRETARY, MINISTRY OF HEALTH

Many share meals prepared for patients and can afford neither transportation nor housing near the hospitals where their services are required on a 24-hour basis, a senior doctor said, asking not to be named to freely discuss the sensitive matter.

"They (interns) now live in funny and crime-prone neighbourhoods, and some have fallen victims of theft," the doctor said. The problem of under-facilitation for interns, according to a highly placed government source, is because many more universities unlike before, now train medical students yet the current internship budget has been capped for only 350 students. This has strained the resources, adulterated the hands-on placements, raising questions altogether about the quality of some of the new doctors churned en masse by institutions.

Mr Kusasira denied that the interns were facing cruel and dehumanising treatment at work where they stand in for senior doctors regularly pre-occupied with management or

off-site consultancy work.

Interns at Mulago hospital have previously taken industrial action to compel the government to pay their allowances. This year, they were deprived of the opportunity to elect their leaders, which has in turn denied them a galvanising structure.

"I decided to rent a small house [in Kawempe, a Kampala suburb] because we were not given accommodation at the beginning of our internship in August, last year," one intern said, asking for his name to be withheld to avoid potential administrative sanction. Mulago hospital officials said the building they used to house interns is being renovated.

The male intern said he spends Shs3,000 each day on transport fare to and from work at Mulago hospital, and he has relied on the largess of relatives to meet his living expenses in the city without government funding.

"Some of our colleagues have since chosen to rent small rooms in unsafe places, which they share two people, while others [defaulting on rent] end up going home very late in the night [to dodge the landlord]," the intern said.

High transport costs

Another female intern at the hospital said she spends Shs6,000 on transport daily besides other upkeep bills.

She said: "Sometimes we end up skipping days without coming to work because you have no money for transport despite the heavy workload left to us the staff doctors."

The hospital has threatened to do without the interns whenever they raised their problems, one intern told this newspaper.

"We have met the executive director of Mulago (Dr Byarugaba Baterana) several times, but he has not given a clear answer and we are actually no longer open to his office," the intern said.