

Bilharzia or witchcraft? Kasese leaders seek to demystify myth

A mass campaign is on to sensitise residents of Kasese district about the dangers of bilharzia. However, there is one stumbling block – witchcraft, **Umar Nsubuga** writes

From the time bilharzia was declared a disaster in Kasese in 2010, there have been numerous campaigns to sensitise residents about the condition. Bilharzia is one of the neglected tropical diseases in Uganda.

Several campaigns have been running in the district and most of the residents are aware of bilharzia and other neglected tropical diseases.

However, there are some who are still stuck to the myth that the disease is caused by witchcraft.

This was confirmed by Kibwana Buluku, Kayanja landing site's local council chairperson.

"When RTI/Envision and officials from the Ministry of Health first came over five years ago and tested our village members and the results showed that 95% of them were at risk of contracting bilharzia. This was shocking," he said.

"I blamed parents for not giving their children medicine during the mass drug administration campaigns. But when the ministry came up with the strategy of sensitising people and also giving medicine, hope was



A girl drawing water from the shores of Lake Albert. Experts say such water should be boiled before drinking to avoid bilharzia. Photo by Umar Nsubuga

restored," he added. Many people at Kayanja landing site, on the shores Lake Edward,

think they are getting free water, but instead they are exposing themselves to waterborne diseases, according to USAID's senior public health adviser Rob Henry.

He said such diseases include bilharzia, diarrhoea, trachoma, typhoid and scabies, adding that these conditions do not only affect residents' health, but also their finances.

Kibwana said they still have a challenge of sensitising people, especially those living near Lake Edward about bilharzia. Some parents think bilharzia is caused by witchcraft and claim that the side-effects are a result of treating 'traditional' diseases with foreign medicine. So, they discourage their children from taking the drugs.

Dr Edridah Muheki, the acting assistant commissioner for health services in the vector control division, said bilharzia is preventable and treatable.

"The health ministry distributes free bilharzia drugs to all the 73 affected districts. All school-going children are given praziquantel on an annual basis to prevent the disease, although, the disease is yet to be wiped out," she says.

Transmission

It is acquired when people get into contact with fresh water contaminated with faeces.

SYMPTOMS

Medical personnel says days after infection, some people develop itchy skin with a rash. Other signs are fever, chills, cough and muscle aches, which can develop within two months of infection. They also say most people show no symptoms in the early stages of infection. Experts say the best way to prevent bilharzia (schistosomiasis) is to avoid swimming or wading in freshwater and drinking safe water. They also say it can be treated if people adhere to the advice given to them, especially by taking drugs as prescribed by health officials.

About the disease

Bilharzia is a disease of the tropics caused by parasitic flatworms that live in human blood vessels.

According to Dr Edridah Muheki, a commissioner in the health ministry, bilharzia can damage internal organs such as the liver, spleen, bladder and kidneys.

She adds that bilharzia makes children stunted and reduces their physical and mental development, which hinders education performance and future adult productivity.

The disease is prevalent in tropical and sub-tropical areas, especially in poor communities without safe water and poor sanitation.

Benjamin Binagwa, the chief of party for RTI/ Envision, said bilharzia mainly affects people living near water sources. "We need to sensitise our people, because they are responsible for sanitation and good hygiene in a community."

The disease is one of the Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs), which are chronic diseases with serious consequences and they mainly affect populations living in low-income rural areas, according to Carly Smith, the NTD programme assistant with USAID.

