

Health ministry, doctors clash over Congo fever

By Lisa Nsaba and Cecilia Okoth

The Uganda Medical Association (UMA) and Ministry of Health have issued contradictory statements regarding the outbreak of Crimean-Congo haemorrhagic fever.

Minister's statement

On Sunday, the health state minister in charge of general duties, Sarah Opendi, said there had been no outbreak of Crimean-Congo haemorrhagic fever in Nakaseke district and the entire Cattle Corridor.

The conclusion, she said, was reached after blood samples were collected from six people who came into contact with the registered case. Opendi said samples of six people, including parents of the victim, were sent to the Uganda Virus Research Institute and they tested negative.

The individuals also tested negative for other haemorrhagic fevers such as Ebola, Marburg, Rift Valley and Sosuga.

Doctors disagree

The doctors' association yesterday disputed the ministry's declaration.

During a press briefing at Mulago in Kampala, members of UMA said the highly contagious Crimean-Congo haemorrhagic fever, with a 40% mortality rate, had not been eradicated from the areas where it was first reported.

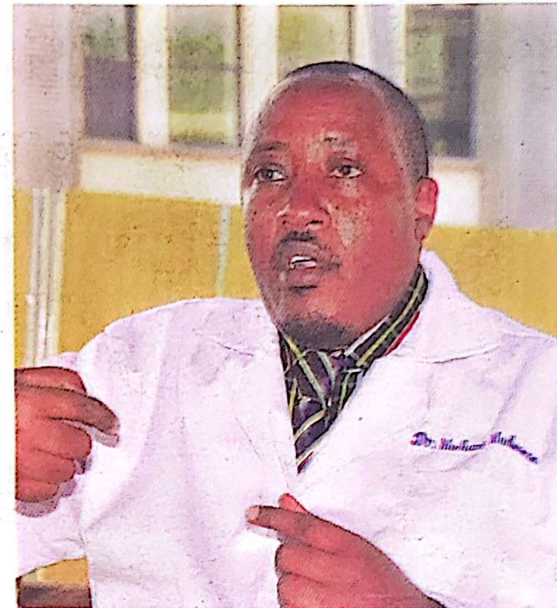
"We have been following this epidemic since the last episode of August/September 2017 and learnt that the most recent case was on December 26 and the patient was discharged," Dr. Mukuzi Muhereza, the UMA secretary general, said.

"A suspected case died and was buried in accordance to the epidemic guidelines. There are other several cases of the virus in the community," he added.

Muhereza said UMA was shocked to learn that the ministry had already declared Nakaseke district and the entire Cattle Corridor free of the disease without carrying out proper investigations.



Minister Opendi said UMA's statements were unfortunate



UMA secretary general Mukuzi Muhereza speaking to journalists at Mulago yesterday. Photo by Nancy Nanyonga

"We are disappointed in the way the ministry has handled the epidemic, especially the permanent secretary because one of haemorrhagic fever is an epidemic," Muhereza stated.

Muhereza wondered why the ministry did not wait for the World Health Organisation (WHO) 21-day period to elapse before declaring the area fever-free.

UMA noted that several suspected cases continue to arise in places such as Kalagala in Nakaseke and

Butuntumula in Luwero district. Muhereza said due to inability to handle the fever, most patients who turn up at Nakaseke Hospital are referred to Kiwoko, a private hospital.

"We believe that the best way to respond to the epidemic is to get to its reservoirs, educate residents and protect health workers involved in treating patients," he noted.

Opendi responds

When contacted, Opendi said UMA's statements were unfortunate, adding that the ministry cannot declare a

What is Congo fever?

Crimean-Congo is a viral haemorrhagic fever transmitted by ticks and spreads to humans either through tick-bites, or contact with viraemic animal tissues during and immediately after slaughter. It usually manifests with fever, muscle ache, dizziness, neck pain and stiffness, backache, headache, sore eyes and sensitivity to light.

Other signs include vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain and bleeding both beneath the skin and through all body openings.



Crimean-Congo fever is transmitted by ticks

disease outbreak where there is none.

"The doctors are speaking carelessly. Where is their evidence and how can they go on to make such statements?" the minister said, adding that there is ongoing sensitisation in the communities.



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