

Delayed. Officials had expected installation of the new machine to start this week but the arrangement has gone off-rail.

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Mulago fails to unveil new cancer machine

KAMPALA. The planned installation of a new Cobalt-60 radiotherapy machine is running behind schedule after its release from a Customs warehouse initially slammed into administrative headwinds created by non-payment of associated costs.

An event organised for the Health minister, Dr Ruth Aceng to unveil the long-awaited machine to journalists was, as a result, yesterday cancelled at the last minute without formal explanation.

Dr Jackson Orem, the executive director of Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI), last evening, however, told this newspaper that the machine was later released and moved to the institute following resolution of payment obligations.

Initial reports suggested that Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) held onto the machine over unpaid tax, but its commissioner for customs, Mr Dicksons Kateshumbwa, disputed this account, saying they waived tax on the machine and UCI had failed to pick it for unknown reasons.

Dr Orem later said the transporter retained the radiotherapy machine because the Czech manufacturer had not paid him. It was unclear by press time if the payment had been cleared.

The ping-pong by bureaucrats served as a heart-break to cancer patients for who time means the difference between life-and-death, having anxiously waited for more affordable treatment in Uganda since the old Cobalt-60 machine in March, last year, broke down beyond repair.

Charges

According to UCI, unlike previously when cancer patients were treated at no cost, it is this time considering to introduce a fee as part of the cost-sharing and to eliminate under-the-table pay allegedly solicited by its staff.

Officials had expected installation of the new machine to start this week, but investigations by this newspa-

STEPS TO BE FOLLOWED BY CANCER PATIENTS



STEP I

Patient arrives at Uganda Cancer Institute, reports to a shed and is registered by a nurse who takes the medical history and recommends additional medical investigations. These include blood tests, ultrasound and X-rays and computed tomography (CT) scan.

STEP II

Doctor examines patient at Out-patient clinic, refers to Radiotherapy Unit upon a patient undergoing required examinations at Mulago, except audiometry. Process takes two days to a week. Patient returns test results to Out-patient unit.



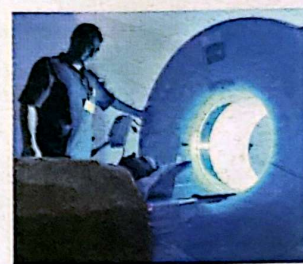
STEP III

Patient reports to Radiotherapy Unit, registers and is counselled on benefits and side effects of treatment, signs consent forms, is prepared for radiotherapy session and number of doses depends on cancer stage. Emergency cases handled within a day and other categories may take 16 days before undergoing session.



STEP IV

Patient presents registration card at the Reception, proceeds to a waiting room pending treatment sheet prepared by a nurse. Patient wears gown, is ushered into Radiotherapy room, lies on the Cobalt-60 machine bed, gamma rays beam from the machine's source to kill targeted tumors. Radiotherapist monitors procedure on an external screen.



per show that the arrangement has gone off-rail. The foreign engineers expected in the country to fix the machine were a no-show by last night and the machine's most vital element --- the radioactive source that beams gamma rays to kill cancer cells --- is nowhere.

Additional civil works are required on the renovated bunker at Old Mulago, including expanding the door and partitioning the room, raising question as to whether the refurbishment was not tailored to actual size of the Shs2.7b machine. Officials said the machine arrived in the country at

the weekend, but it has not been displayed publicly.

UCI has admitted that its radiotherapists will require refresher training --- estimated at the minimum to last a week --- to gain necessary skills to flawlessly operate the new Cobalt-60 machine. There is no timeline yet for the training, uncertainty hangs over the budget and it remains unclear when the specialists to conduct the training will fly in.

Although not significantly different in design and performance, Dr Orem said there is a possibility that the computerised unit may require different

KEY ISSUES

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set of skills.

UCI is already grappling with manpower shortage, with three out of its

eight radiotherapists undertaking advanced studies in Zambia.

One of the radiotherapists told this newspaper on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to talk to the media, that it is likely that installation of the Cobalt-60 machine will take at least four months, pushing its availability for use to late 2017 or early next year.

This estimate contrasts with the more enthusiastic assessment by Dr Orem that the machine would be ready for testing and fully operational within a month, meaning the first cancer patient could be wheeled on it as early as October.

Whichever the timeline, UCI plans to run the machine on a 24-hour basis all through the week in a race to clear a backlog of hundreds of patients in queue over the past 17 months. There were no immediate figures about the number of cancer patients awaiting treatment or information on whether the backlog will be cleared first before new patients can be taken on.

Sessions

At the envisaged pace, however, radiotherapists plan to handle 30 to 70 patients a day and each will require to undergo anywhere between 25 and 30 radiotherapy sessions, depending on the stage and manifestations of the disease.

Some cancer patients unable to wait for or afford radiotherapy opt for chemotherapy treatment, which on average costs between Shs220,000 and Shs700,000 per week depending on drug prescription, according to a nurse working with Hospice Africa-Uganda, an organisation offering palliative care.