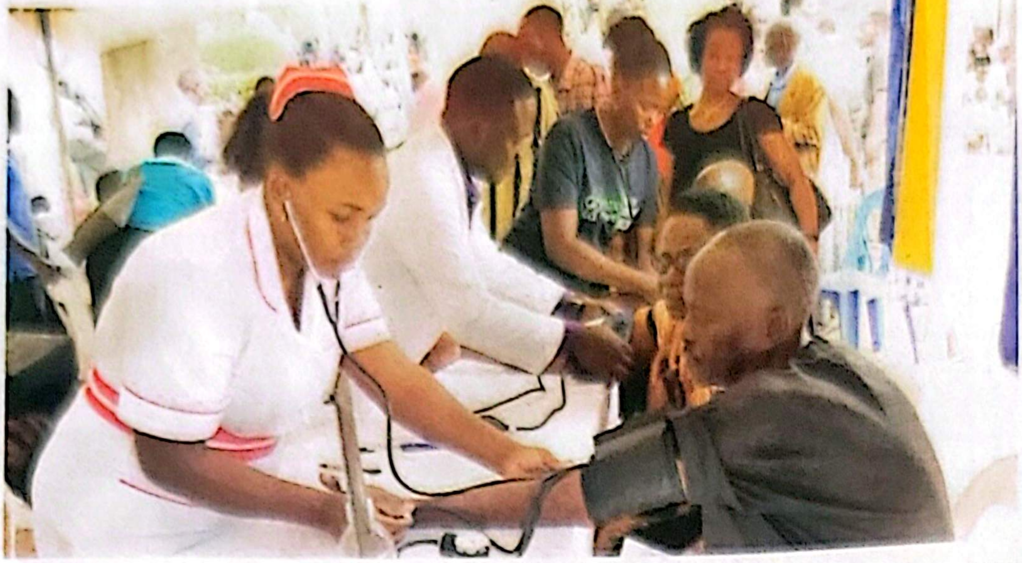

Health services. Ms Joyce Birabwa (left), a nurse at Mengo hospital with other health workers check patients' blood pressure during the commemoration of the International Diabetes Day last month. PHOTO BY JOSEPH KIGGUNDU

Govt slashes budget allocation to hospitals

Setback. Some affected health facilities observe that the reduced funding will weaken their ability to conduct trainings and fail to improve the quality of drugs

BY LILIAN NAMAGEMBE

KAMPALA. Patients in government hospitals across the country will suffer more hardships in the next financial year as funding to the health sector in 2018/2019 budget has been cut.

According to the Ministry of Finance's National Budget Framework Paper submitted to Parliament, the health sector budget has been cut further from the previous Shs1.85 trillion in 2017/2018 to Shs1.714 trillion in the coming 2018/2019 financial year.

This means the reduction will widen from the current Shs35b to Shs137b in the next financial year.

As a result, all funding to regional referral hospitals, including Mulago National Referral Hospital and Butabika Mental Rehabilitation Hospital have been cut.

The budgets of Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI) and Uganda Heart Institute (UHI) were not spared either.

Dr John Omangino, the executive director of UHI, whose budget was cut from Shs12b to Shs11b, said the reduced funding will weaken the institute's ability to run trainings and other outreach programmes.

"A Shs1b reduction means about 100 patients cannot be given holistic treatment and operation," Dr Omangino said.

He said he hopes the budget allocation to the cancer institute will be revisited.

The cancer institute suffered deeper financial cuts with its budget reduced by Shs12b from Shs50b in this financial year down to Shs38b in the next financial year despite the increasing incidence of cancer in the country.

The institute is caring for a total of more than 44,000 patients.

The institute has also since acquired a more advanced cobalt 60 radiotherapy machine which needs routine servicing.

Officials at UCI have blamed the rampant drug shortages at the institute on inadequate funding of Shs53b, less than half of Shs123b the institute says it needs to provide optimal care to patients.

At Butabika National Mental Rehabilitation Referral Hospital, Dr David Basangwa, the executive director, was similarly disturbed by the budget cuts to the sector.

Impact

Dr Basangwa said government's failure to increase the hospital budget means they will continue administering cheap drugs which cause a lot of side effects to the patients.

"We have been requesting for some more funding but it has not come...but the process [budgeting] is on-going," Dr Basangwa said by telephone yesterday.

Butabika hospital budget has been cut down by Shs339m from Shs11b.

Mental health patients at the hospital, which on average handles 850 in-patients and at least 300 out-patients daily, recently complained of the severe side effects such as drowsiness, fatigue and inability to pay attention which reduces their productivity as a result of taking the cheap drugs.

Similarly, although government has committed to increasing salaries of doctors in all public hospitals following their strike earlier this year, the wage budget in the heath sector has remained the same at Shs401b. Besides, in the National Budget Framework Paper, the Ministry of Finance announced that there will be no money for salary enhancement for government workers in the next financial year.

President Museveni, during a series of negotiations with the striking doctors last month, pledged Shs5m as a starting salary for medical doctors and other scientists in a deal to defuse the strike and check high brain-drain to other countries.

Mr Jim Mugunga, the Finance Ministry spokesperson, defended the budget cuts.

"Normally, when there are adjustments [cuts], they are not necessarily affecting strategic parts of the sector but other unplanned areas like travels," he said.

However on the issue of doctors' salary enhancement, Mr Mugunga could not explain where else the ministry expects to raise the money to fulfill the pledge.

He referred *Daily Monitor* to Mr David Bahati, the Minister of State for Finance in charge of Planning, whose known cellular phone contact was not available by press time.

Dr Jane Ruth Aceng, the Health minister, was adamant that the budget cuts will not affect their operations.

Dr Aceng said the budget reductions were based on projects which ended and whose money has not been reflected in the coming budget.

She added that the ministry will focus more on promoting public health and reducing government expenditure to cover the funding gaps.

"The budget framework paper is just the beginning of the budgeting process. They keep increasing; for example, the budget for Uganda Cancer Institute and medicines and supplies keeps increasing," Dr Aceng said.

However, despite the budget cuts, there has been a slight increase in the budget for pharmaceutical and other medical supplies by Shs41b.

The budget for Uganda Virus Research Institute (UVRI) in Entebbe was also increased by Shs4b from Shs1 billion to Shs5b.

"Shs1b reduction [for UHI] means about 100 patients cannot be given holistic treatment and operation." JOHN OMANGINO, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF UGANDA HEALTH INSTITUTE

"The budget framework paper is just the beginning of the budgeting process! They [allocations] keep increasing," JANE RUTH ACENG, HEALTH MINISTER

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