

Busoga hospitals lack TB isolation wards

IGANGA

By George Bita

"Tuberculosis (TB) can be cured. Get free treatment here," reads the signpost at the gate to Iganga Hospital.

The same message welcomes patients to compounds of all health centres throughout the Busoga region. Unfortunately, patients mingle freely with other sick persons.

Dr Stephen Waako, the medical superintendent of Iganga Hospital, said the number of TB patients in the hospital had risen.

"Back then, it would take a week or so before encountering a new TB case. But nowadays, we attend to an average of four patients every week," Waako said.

Why isolate?

Dr Andrew Muleledhu, the medical superintendent of Kamuli Mission Hospital in Kamuli district, said the TB virus exists in the body under preventive watch of its immune system.

"The recent surge in its prevalence is because of HIV. The immunity lapse caused by HIV encourages TB to attack easily," Muleledhu said.

He said isolating patients would control the possibility of infecting others because of the presence of multi drug resistant TB (MDR-TB) patients who fail to respond to the usual dosages offered at most health centres.



Patients await treatment at Iganga Hospital. Photo by George Bita

"Their condition is difficult to handle due to the absence of an isolation ward. Since the disease spreads through air, this puts other persons at risk of picking up the disease-causing germs," he said.

HIV/AIDS link

Dr Henry Kalende, the medical superintendent of St Francis Hospital in Buluba, Mayuge District, said the

relationship between TB and HIV/AIDS is no longer a secret, since research shows that out of every 10 TB patients, seven are likely to have HIV.

"TB has been singled out as the cause of death in an estimated 30% of HIV-related deaths," Kalende said.

Kalende said the HIV infection rate at the lakeshores is at 9%, with TB following closely, at 5%.

ON THE GROUND

■ Safina Mutesi, an enrolled nurse at Bwondha Health Centre II, said by 2014 over 900 fishermen had tested HIV positive but only 512 of those manage to keep up with their regular ARVs appointments. Those who do not come for the appointments are usually on the move, putting other people at risk.

Safina Mutesi, an enrolled nurse at Bwondha Health Centre II in Mayuge District, said by 2014, over 900 fishermen had tested HIV positive.

"Unfortunately, just 512 of those infected keep up with their regular antiretroviral (ARVs) appointments. Since it is a fishing community, those who do not honour appointments are on the move to islands, putting other people at risk," she said.

Statistics

Ministry of Health data (2016) indicates that about 4,000 people nationwide are diagnosed with TB annually, while another 60,000 are at the risk of infection.

UNAIDS data shows that 44,071 new and relapsed TB cases were identified in Uganda over the last eight years, of which 335 had MDR-TB. Uganda is ranked among the 22 high TB burden countries in the world. It suffers an

estimated 5,000 TB-related deaths annually.

A World Health Organisation (WHO) and Global Fund study in conjunction with the health ministry, released in 2016, showed that the TB prevalence was on the rise. It indicated that 253 per 100,000 people had TB, compared to 159 per 100,000 in 2015.

"USAID helped refurbish six MDR-TB isolation wards at Mbale, Gulu, Kabale, Masaka, Fort Portal and Mubende hospitals. However, patients at other centres may fail to make it to these hospitals," Dr David Muwanguzi, the Iganga district health officer, reveals.

He suggested that a similar TB isolation ward in Busoga sub-region would help change the status quo.

He said drug-resistant TB occurs when patients develop resistance to Rifampicin and Isoniazid; the most powerful drugs in treating TB.

Way forward

Muwanguzi said the 90-90-90 UNAIDS strategy to suppress HIV infections could help curb the TB infections in the sub-region.

"UNAIDS wants by 2020 to have 90% of all people living with HIV know their status, so that 90% of them get ARVs to make 90% have viral suppression. Once the HIV infections are brought under control, then the TB virus will equally be contained," he said.