

Claim. Since Bukwo is near Kenya, it is alleged that most of the drugs especially antimalarial ones find their way to Kenya.

Drug theft hits Bukwo Hospital

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BUKWO. On May 28, Bukwo District Hospital staff woke up to the news of the disappearance of drugs valued at Shs40 million from the hospital store.

According to one account, as of May 26, the items were in the hospital store.

Storekeepers Emily Cherop and Scovia Cherop claim to have done a stock take on a Friday. However, on a Sunday when Ms Cherop went to the store to pick mattresses to give to interns, she realised the store was disorganised.

She is said to have alerted senior medical officers who then went to observe what exactly had happened.

The senior officers realised 10 cartons of Coartem, an antimalarial drug, an unknown number of rapid diagnostic test kits for malaria, among other items, were missing.

Ms Cherop later reported the case, referenced CRB 249/2017 of loss of drugs, at Bukwo Central Police Station.

A meeting of the hospital's senior staff on Monday asked the Medical Superintendent, Mr Godfrey Barteka, to write to the district's chief administrative officer for advice.

As they waited for guidance, the police arrested five medical officers, a guard, two store officers, Ms Cherop and the hospital administrator, Mr Dominic Kaprunge and the district health officer, Mr Collins Satya four days later. They were released [on police bond] two days later.

A source who confided in this reporter said the issue of drug theft is not new.

"There has been an ongoing syndicate from time to time. The problem is that the Chief Administrative Officer, Mr Francis Odap, wrote to the stores in-charge to make some changes but it was discovered recently that the directive on key handling was never implemented," the source said.

Ms Violet Chekwel, a resident of Kasikwar Ward in Bukwo Town Council, said persistent drug theft in the hospital has led to constant drug stock outs.

And because of the stock outs, the patients have to purchase drugs from [private] clinics.

"Essential drugs, especially antimalarial drugs and antibiotics are out of stock in the hospital and we have to purchase them from clinics that are owned by the same health personnel or their friends and relatives," Ms Chekwel said.

She added that they are also charged between Shs100,000 and Shs200,000 for caesarean (C-section) operation.

She said her sister almost died since her husband could not raise Shs100,000 for a C-section.

Luckily, she gave birth normally.

Mr John Sumbara Sikawa, the chairperson of the hospital management committee, suggested that the district health officer, his driver, Denis Chilla and the store officers should be investigated.

Mr Sikawa said the store should



Attended. Left to right: Bukwo RDC Shaban Kachimete, MP Paul Chelimo and the district Woman MP Evelyn Cherrutai at the meeting last week. PHOTO BY JOYCE CHERUTAI



Concerned. A woman asks health officials to explain why antimalarials are always out of stock at Bukwo Hospital during the meeting last week. PHOTO BY JOYCE CHERUTAI

have been opened by the two store officers but it is unfortunate that only one of them, Ms Cherop opened it to get mattresses for the interns.

"It was reported to us that the store was opened after 5pm and that the mattresses were taken one at a time yet the vehicle could carry all of them at once. There is no law that allows opening of the store at the weekend or after 5pm," he said.

Mr Sikawa said last July some health personnel were implicated in the theft of five cartons of Coartem

but no action was taken by district authorities or police.

"When we, the new management, tried to follow-up, we were told that it was not our mandate," he said.

He claimed that some security officers and district leaders could be shielding or conniving with thieves to deprive the poor people of better service delivery.

The district public accounts committee (PAC) chairperson, Mr Zakayo Malinga Tenderessy, said at a public gathering last week that the issue of drug theft needs urgent attention.

"As PAC, we want to see the key suspects prosecuted soon. We cannot continue seeing the same thing crop up all the time without any punishment. The new people who have been put to manage the drug store may still continue with the vice if nothing is done," he said.

He said drug theft is rarely reported unless a member of the community is in the know.

Mr Joseph Kweyey, a civic educator with Kapchorwa Civil Society Organisation's Alliance (KACSOA), blamed the authorities for general laxity.

"The suspects were only arrested after the public threatened to demonstrate against silence of responsible authorities... We hear that the file has now gone to the Resident State Attorney. But the culprits may never be brought to book," he said.

He said that many believe that the drugs are successfully removed from the store with the connivance of some senior hospital staff, the drivers and store officers who create scenes to have the drug store opened at odd hours.

"Some people have heard the ambulance siren and [seen the ambulance] rushing at breakneck speed towards Suam border and finally across to Kenya when no one knows of a patient who was due for referral," he said.

Mr Kweyey added that the theft is

a syndicate that ensures the store is opened at odd hours by store officers while sometimes the keys are handed over to unauthorised staff.

"In one instance, the key is alleged to have changed hands from Ms Scovia Cherop, a one called Zulla, Mr Denis Kiprotich and to Cherop Emily," he said.

Management questioned what criteria was being used to freely hand over keys to anyone without question yet the store had valuable things that needed maximum security.

The district police commander, Mr Alfred Baluku, said some cases never progress because of lack of substantive evidence to pin culprits.

He said he would look at the old file to see what happened since he was out of office on a refresher course at that time.

On the May incident, he said they took time to arrest suspects since they were still investigating the delicate matter.

"Our investigations are complete and the file was forwarded to the State Attorney for legal advice. We shall act after his advice. Expect the suspects to appear in court as soon as court resumes after the strike by prosecutors," he said.

Mr Odap blamed the district health officer for overstretching his mandate to manage the hospital.

"It is suspected that the drugs must have disappeared on Sunday when the mattresses were being removed on the orders of the DHO. The store should have been opened with permission of the Administrator or Medical Superintendent [MS]," said Mr Odap.

He also accused the hospital's administrators of failing to monitor and manage key handling following a case that was reported some time last year on the same.

"I had in November last year directed that the store be accessed by both store officers and that the keys should have been kept at the office of the MS or administrator when we realised that there could be occurrences of theft but it is unfortunate that the keys would be carried home by either of the people manning the store."

A box of Coartem contains 30 doses and the recent loss of 10 cartons implies that 300 adults will have to purchase the antimalarial from a private facility at a cost whereas the 1,000 vials of Ampiclox that disappeared would treat between 50-80 patients.

Voices

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ALFRED BALUKU, BUKWO DISTRICT POLICE COMMANDER



"The Director of Health Services at the Ministry of Health, Dr Anthony Mbonye, says drug theft leads to shortages and puts a patient's life at risk."

DR ANTHONY MBONYE, DIRECTOR OF HEALTH SERVICES

"As district public accounts committee, we want to see the key suspects prosecuted soon. We cannot continue seeing the same thing crop up all the time without any punishment."

ZAKAYO MALINGA TENDERESSY, DISTRICT PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSON

ISSUES AT HAND

Cost. A dose of Coartem in a private clinic in Kenya is estimated to cost about Shs30,000, according to some sources who have accessed treatment in the neighbouring country where several referrals in Bukwo Hospital are made to because of proximity.

Measures taken. Mr Francis Odap, the Bukwo District chief administrative officer, confirmed that key suspects including the Ag. DHO, Mr Collins Satya and Mr Benson Sakit, a guard have been interdicted following plenary police investigations while new people have been appointed to manage the store. The hospital administration has since replaced the wooden door with a metallic one.