

# 'Hepatitis B affecting blood donations'

By Nicholas Wassajja  
and Sarah Mazirwe

The Uganda Blood Transfusion Services (UBTS) has expressed concern over the alarming rate at which they have to discard blood contaminated by the Hepatitis B infection.

UBTS director Dr. Dorothy Kyeyune, while responding to queries raised by the 2015/16 Auditor General's report during an interface with the

Public Accounts Committee of Parliament yesterday, said: "Five per cent of the blood we discard is as a result of Hepatitis B, especially where the infection is most prevalent."

The health ministry says Hepatitis B is most prevalent in northern Uganda and West Nile region.

The World Health Organisation estimates that 686,000 people die annually from Hepatitis B-related complications.

Hepatitis, defined as the inflammation of the liver, is transmitted mainly through sexual intercourse, sharing needles with affected persons, mother-to-child and

## HEALTH MINISTRY RESPONDS

Dr. Diana Atwine, the Ministry of Health permanent secretary



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Like any other infection, once you donate blood, it will definitely be infected, but this should not be happening because it costs money. Imagine how much we lose on securing that 5% that is discarded. Therefore, there should be concerted efforts to create awareness and have people tested and vaccinated.

blood transfusions.

With a government allocation of about sh10b towards the procurement of Hepatitis B vaccines in Uganda, it is estimated that at least 3.5 million people are living with the infection, which accounts for 10% of the population.

The Ministry of Health's permanent secretary, Dr. Diana Atwine, said: "We

are aware of the problem, but it is largely caused by people not knowing their Hepatitis B status."

She added: "Like any other infection, once you donate blood, it will definitely be infected, but this should not be happening because it costs money."

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Therefore, there should be concerted efforts to create awareness and have people tested and vaccinated." Atwine said.

A single dose of Hepatitis B vaccine could go for about sh80,000 in a private health facility, while it costs the Government sh15,000 per dose. Three vaccines are required for each individual.

The Auditor General's report indicates that UBTS budgeted to collect 266,805 units of blood in the previous financial year, but only 247,711 units were realised, resulting in a 7.2% shortfall of blood required for donation.

Kyeyune said besides Hepatitis B causing a shortfall in the blood units targeted for collection, they (UBTS) are also suffering funding gaps that the Government needs to address.

"Uganda's blood collection target had been steadily increasing at a rate of 10% annually, until 2015/16, when the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief project ended. We expected Government to scale up its funding to fill the gap, but this has not been the case," Kyeyune said.

Whereas UBTS indicated that it needed about sh15b for essential medicines and health supplies that support collection of the needed blood units, the Government only provided sh7.8b in the 2015/16 financial year under review, according to the Auditor General's report.

The committee, chaired by Angelina Osege (Soroti) tasked Kyeyune with explaining why blood that is donated at a zero charge is being sold to people during emergency situations in almost all health centres.

"You people are employed to ensure people get blood, but you are sleeping on the job. Why do our people pay money to get blood, yet they already pay taxes for its collection?" wondered Gerald Karuhanga (Ntungamo Municipality).

Kyeyune confessed that UBTS had deployed all sorts of interventions to curtail the selling of blood in vain, calling for assistance from Parliament and other sector players.

Osege instead gave UBTS two months to come up with a comprehensive plan detailing specific interventions that UTBS can use to end the sale of blood.