

ONLY 40 % OF CHILDREN GET PROPER MEDICATION – REPORT

BY JOHN MASABA

Uganda's campaign to cut back on mortality figures of children under five years could be under threat, after a new study conducted on health facilities in the country showed that less than half of the children who visit hospitals get proper medical attention.

The study done by Ecumenical Pharmaceutical Network (EPN), an international pharmaceutical company, in conjunction with Joint Medical Stores, said only 40% of children in Uganda access proper medication. This is increasing on drug resistance and deaths due to over dosing of children that visit health facilities.

Under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, Uganda is expected to reduce infant mortality to 12 deaths per 1,000 by 2030. Currently, it stands at 54/1,000 live births.

The startling results come after EPN, a Nairobi-based organisation, carried out a survey on 72 facilities in Uganda.

"We chose faith-based not-for-profit facilities because in Sub-Saharan Africa, these institutions are responsible for treating 45% of all patients that visit a health facility," Dr Tracy Muraya, the programme officer at EPN, said. The facilities sampled served an average of 184,552 people for a period of one year ending April 2017, the study said. Out of those, the study found that there were 492 deaths out of 18,731 children that were hospitalised.

The report does not indicate whether the deaths reported were directly a result of poor illness management. However, the research found many health centres had regular drug stock-outs of child-friendly medicines, which World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends for treatment of children under five years.

"We found that most facilities were dispensing adult tablets and recommending breaking them to provide for the children's needs. That is dangerous. How do you break capsules down, for example," Muraya said.

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He said they found out that the problem of drug stock-outs arose out of a decision by the Ministry of Health to delete some drugs, including paediatric syrups, from the essential medicine list due to budget cuts.

Some of the drugs scrapped off the list included paracetamol and amoxicillin syrup vital drugs vital for reliving fever and pain and treating bacterial infections, including pneumonia.

"As such, when complications arise; for example when a child presents with pneumonia, the facility is only able to treat symptoms," she said.

Christopher Tusubira, the head of All Saints Kagoma Health Centre III near Kawempe in Kampala, said it was expensive stocking on children drugs.

Like many other faith-based institutions, the facility charges lower user fees — less than private hospitals.

Tusubira said this is compounded by the recent decision by the Government cut down their primary health care (PHC) fund transfer to faith-based facilities like his.

"Over the last three years, PHC funds have been cut by up to 50%. This affects our budget. We can't now buy some medicines, and pay allowances as we used to do," he said.

The report said many facilities could not employ more qualified personnel while others were struggling to remunerate the available ones.

Facilities run by faith-based organisations provide over 50% of beds and 60% of hospital services according to <http://healthmarketinnovations.org>.

Responding, Dr Sandra Birungi, the assistant commissioner for health promotion and education at the Ministry of Health, said: "It is regrettable that many facilities have been affected, but let them (facilities) not lose hope," promising that her ministry would lobby the finance ministry to increase the resources envelope.