

African govts tasked to fund cancer research

BY STEPHEN OTAGE

KAMPALA. Doctors at Aga Khan University Hospital (AKUH) in Nairobi and the Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI) are calling on African governments to prioritise research on cancers that specifically affect Africans and to fund the development of targeted drugs.

Prof Mansoor Saleh, the head of the Department of Haematology Oncology at AKUH, said most cancer specialists on the continent are unsure whether the drugs they prescribe are effective.

Globally, only four percent of African patients participate in clinical trials, yet pharmaceutical companies often develop drugs based on studies involving Egyptian or South African patients, whose genetic makeup differs from most Africans.

"Twenty percent of African women have triple-negative aggressive breast cancer, which does not respond well to standard therapy," Prof Saleh said last Friday at Aga Khan University. "We compared the genetic makeup of Kenyan women with Caucasian women from Alabama and African-American women and found major differences. Many of the drugs being sent to Kenya were ineffective, so we advised manufactur-

ers to stop sending them," he added.

He cited another example involving the gene KrasG12C, linked to high cancer risk. Testing 100 Kenyan patients revealed none had the mutation, although patients from Uganda, Rwanda, and Ethiopia did. Prof Saleh recalled a Ugandan judge who carried the mutation but could not be saved because treatment came too late.

Dr Nixon Niyonzima, the head of research at UCI, confirmed that without locally funded research, doctors rely on externally developed drugs that may not suit African patients.

"Investing in local research ensures the medicines prescribed target the specific cancers affecting our people," he said.

AKUH also commissioned its TrueBeam Radiotherapy System, described by Prof Shaukat Abdulrazak, the principal secretary in the State Department for Science, Research, as a milestone in regional cancer care.

The system integrates real-time imaging, precision radiation, and AI-enabled treatment planning to target tumours accurately while protecting healthy tissue.

Dr Rashid Khalani, the chief executive officer of AKUH emphasised that the new technology represents the hospi-



The TrueBeam Radiotherapy System targets tumours accurately while protecting healthy tissue. PHOTO/STEPHEN OTAGE

tal's commitment to transforming cancer care in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Dr Niyonzima noted that UCI un-

veiled three similar machines in 2021. Despite these advancements, late presentation remains a key challenge.