

HIV drug shortage hits nation

By Elvis Basudde

The World Health Organisation (WHO) conditionally recommends the use of Septrin for people living with HIV/AIDS for the treatment of opportunistic infections.

Septrin is a wonder drug which, when taken daily, gives tremendous relief to and prolongs the life of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). However, 32-year-old Ruth Nakalembe, a resident of Nabigulu sub-county, in Kamuli district, has not had Septrin for the last four months.

"I continue to take my ARVs and I have never missed. But I am worried because my counsellors have told me that not taking Septrin would result in HIV-related illnesses. No wonder, I have developed infections of the chest and malaria," she says.

"I know Septrin is not an alternative to ARVs, but complementary treatment, which is extremely essential. It is treatment given to we people living with HIV when we are not suffering from the ailment to fortify us against the disease."

Septrin, a brand name for a combination of antibiotics called cotrimoxazole, is an anti-bacterial product meant for infections like upper respiratory tract infections, middle ear infections, urinary tract infections, gonorrhoea and diarrhoea.

The most common dose for prophylaxis for PLWHA is one double strength (960mg) tablet every day. An alternative dose is one tablet three times a week. The 960mg Septrin costs between sh100 and sh200 per tablet while a monthly dose costs between sh3,000 and sh6,000.

Nakalembe says that she has resorted to buying Septrin on the open market although sometimes she fails to raise money since she doesn't have a stable source of income. But Nakalembe is not alone. The stock-out of Septrin has become a national problem and it is affecting people living with HIV/AIDS in most districts.

During a two-day fact finding survey in the eastern region, courtesy of Advocacy For Better Health (ABH), reporters were shocked to learn that the problem was overwhelming. Steven Salamuka, the co-ordinator of Kamuli district PLWHA forum and who has lived with HIV since 1988, says the stock-out of Septrin has adversely impacted on people living with HIV.

"Many have started experiencing opportunistic infections in spite of the fact that they are adhering to ARVs. We have not had Septrin for the last four months and there is no proper explanation other than just saying it is a national problem. I have lived with HIV for over 30 years and from a personal experience, I can say Septrin has played a central role. I cannot imagine how my life would be without it," Salamuka says.

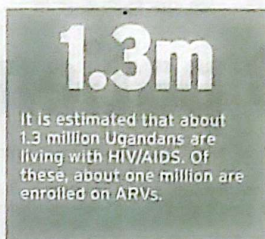
He says he gets frequent fevers if he does not take Septrin. It has also adversely impacted on his income because he has to buy it every month, and being a retired civil servant, he has no steady income apart from the



Ngobi and Salamuka. They said the stock-out of Septrin has predisposed people living with HIV to opportunistic infections, as some of them have gone four months without it. Photos by Elvis Basudde



Luwaga



Kampi

monthly pension which is not big.

He says the stock-out of Septrin is not only in Kamuli Hospital, but it cuts across in all the health facilities in the district which include the two health centres IV, 11 health centre IIIs, and the only one health centre II, which is accredited to offer treatment to people with HIV.

The health facilities affected are Namwenda and Nankanduro health centres IV, Balawoli, Namasagali, Nabirumba, Butansi, Kitayunjwa, Bulopa, Buguluma, Lulyambuzi, Bupadengo, Nawanyago and Mbulamuti health centres III as well as and Buluya health centre II.

"We have talked to the district medicine management supervisor who has reported to the district health officer, but they continue to tell us that there is nothing much they can do about it because it is a national problem. We advise clients to buy Septrin on the open market, though many cannot afford it in this rural area," he says.

Farmer's ordeal

Brian Luwaga, who was born with HIV, gets his medicine from Kamuli Hospital. He has spent four months without getting Septrin from this facility

and he has to wait for the harvesting season to sell his farm products to get money to purchase Septrin.

Stephen Ngobi, the chairperson of people living with HIV in Kamuli district, says the district was doing well in terms of service delivery until four months ago when it was hit by the Septrin stock-out. He says health workers advise HIV positive people to buy Septrin, yet many of them are poor.

"Telling them to buy the drug is like telling them to abandon medicine and, indeed, many have since abandoned it and they are down with opportunistic infections. I wish I could take you to the villages to see the bedridden people due to lack of Septrin," he says.

He called on the Government to come up with quick intervention schemes to save people living with HIV.

Leticia Kampi, who distribute drugs to clients at the ART clinic, says she handles over 180 clients and when they come for a refill, she gives them only ARVs and advises them to go to the open market to buy Septrin.

"When they come for a refill, many complain of different diseases. When I ask them if they are taking their Septrin, they say they have not had it for the last four months. You cannot force these people to buy it though

you know its importance. Most of them are poor. The management of the National Medical Stores (NMS) has made it clear that they do not have Septrin," she said.

"I am not sure when NMS will start distributing the drug again. Initially, NMS was blaming us, saying we do not know how to quantify, how to order and how to estimate the number of clients. We tried to do that, but they have failed us. This is bad!"

Iganga

In Iganga Hospital, the problem is not any different. A number of clients we talked to admitted that they have gone without Septrin for over three months, though the administration downplayed the problem, saying it was not as it was being propagated.

Western Uganda hit too

According to Isaac Ijuka, the supplies officer in Ibanda, the district health office last got Septrin from NMS in December last year. In the meeting he had with the NMS officials in January, NMS advised him to utilise the medicine he had in stock, since it would take some time before they got another supply.

"They told me that I should not order

WHAT OTHERS SAY

Jude Bliqirwenkya of Advocacy for Better Health (ABH)

The continued stock-out of Septrin in health facilities is a big blow to the efforts to curb HIV/AIDS. He says while we may have the ARVs, Septrin is one of those wonder drugs that helps contain opportunistic infections.

These opportunistic infections often cause more problems than HIV itself. If we are going to ask people to buy Septrin, we will have many who will not be able to afford it and their health could deteriorate. The Government should ensure this shortage is addressed.

Dr Fredrick Muwanga, a physician at TASO-Jinja branch

All people living with HIV are given one Septrin a day in addition to ARVs. It is government policy that all be given Septrin.

Dan Kimotho, PRO, NMS.

Septrin, plus some of the ARVs, are supposed to be bought by the Global Fund, but they have not bought it yet. They say they are making arrangements to bring the drug. Meanwhile, we appeal to people living with HIV to buy Septrin from clinics as arrangements are being made by Global Fund.

Moris Seru, assistant commissioner in the Ministry of Health

It is true that there is a stock-out of Septrin and we expect to restock in August. Those who have high CD4 count can do without Septrin, so we are requesting the subscribers to give the little Septrin to those who need it most – those with low CD4 count.

Septrin because it is out of stock. They said no more Septrin until the first circle of the 2018/2019 financial year, which begins this July. I have already sent my order for this season and I did not include Septrin," he said.

He says the problem has also hit Isingiro, Mbarara, Kiruhura and Ntungamo districts.

However, Ijuka said the districts which are under Rwenzori sub-region have not experienced such challenges because they receive Septrin supplies from Baylor Uganda. These are the districts of Kamwenge, Kasese, Kabaloro, Nioroko, Bundibujjo, Kyegegwa, and Kyenjojo.

It is estimated that about 1.3 million Ugandans are living with HIV/AIDS. Of these, about one million are enrolled on ARVs.