Ugandans dodge hepatitis B injection

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KAMPALA. Ugandans living in the 39 districts of northern and Teso sub-regions are dodging the hepatitis B vaccine jab meant to provide them with total immunity against the viral infection.

The revelation was contained in a Ministry of Health report, which indicates that only 724,473 people had received the third dose of the vaccine out of the targeted 4.9 million people in the hepatitis B endemic districts in Lango, West Nile, Teso, Karamoja and Acholi regions.

The latest vaccine coverage report presented to MPs, district chairpersons, district health officers (DHOs) and Resident District Commissioners during an assessment meeting in Kampala yesterday, also showed that about 116,563 people had tested positive to hepatitis B virus out of the tested 2.1 million people.

The Minister of Health, Dr Ruth Aceng, expressed concern that the hepatitis vaccines worth billions of Shillings are likely to expire without being benefiting those who need them.

She directed all stakeholders, especially DHOs to ensure that the vaccines are put to proper use before the end of December.

"By December, you should have used all the vaccines before you start demanding new ones," Dr Aceng said, adding that those still at the National Medical Stores will be sent to other 10 districts in the country that have high prevalence.

According to a recent Uganda Population HIV Impact Assessment report, the prevalence of hepatitis B stands at 4.3 per cent nationally, which Dr Aceng said was manageable with improvements in the government intervention.

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> CECILIA OGWAL, DOKOLO WOMAN MP

She blamed the low use of the vaccine on low levels of awareness among the population in the 39 districts.

But MPs and district chairpersons quickly cited an inadequate budget for social mobilisation, indicating the ministry only allocates Shs2.2 million for creating awareness in every district.

Dokolo Woman MP Cecilia Ogwal called for quick solutions meant to address the fears driving away the population from acquiring a maximum vaccine.

"We should find out why we found hiccups and respond very well and we need to ensure that people especially men get the vaccines," Ms Ogwal said.

Govt blamed

Mr Kenneth Kabagambe, the executive director of the National Organisation for People Living with hepatitis B, a patients' rights advocacy group, blamed the low use on failure by the government to focus on those who test positive.

"We need a lot of awareness campaigns talking about hepatitis B in detail. People have their own versions of the disease and conceive it differently yet wrongly," he said.

Mr Kabagambe said some clinics where hepatitis testing services are offered do not have all the required equipment plus the supplies used such as reagents.

However, Dr Aceng said the Shs10b allocated to the hepatitis B campaign is largely spent on buying vaccines.

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