Improve lifestyle to reduce health expenditure, govt urges

BY LILIAN NAMAGEMBE
lnamagembe@ug.nationmedia.com



Treatment. Residents turn up for testing of various diseases at Kalangala health camp last year. PHOTO BY RACHEL MABALA

KAMPALA. The Health ministry Permanent Secretary, Dr Diana Atwine, has advised Ugandans to avoid risky lifestyles to prevent diseases that are affecting the ministry expenditure.

Dr Atwine said it will be very hard for Uganda to achieve universal health coverage if the ministry continues to spend billions on malaria and other cardiovascular diseases which can easily be prevented by living a healthy lifestyle.

"It is only when people start living a healthy lifestyle that we can ensure universal health. We just need to make a little serious our lives. We are paying supplies for even diseases we can prevent," Dr Atwine said last Friday.

She was speaking at the closure of a three-day symposium on health financing for universal health coverage in low and middle income countries in Kampala.

Organised by Makerere University School of Public Health under the Supporting Policy Engagement for Evidence-based Decisions project in partnership with the Ministry of Health, the event was prepared under the theme; "Financing for Universal Health Coverage more money for health or more health for coverage."

The Health PS said the ministry's resource envelope has remained low yet the disease burden continues to worsen.

Dr Atwine's complaint comes at a time when there is a growing concern that the population is increasingly eating unhealthy, not exercising, smoking tobacco and excessive alcohol consumption, which are all risk factors for chronic diseases such as hypertension, cancer among others.

Today, 2 per cent of Ugandans die from non-communicable diseases and the proportion is increasing every year. Similarly, government spends Shs52 billion annually to fund the Uganda Cancer Institute budget.

The need to ensure proper management of the national health insurance policy and increase the health sector budget topped the agenda at the symposium, as an important factor in ensuring universal health coverage.

The participants argued that despite government efforts to increase the health budget from about 3 per cent in 1993 to between seven and 10 per cent in the past 10 years, the funding has stagnated and yet the population is growing exponentially.

Dr Ekwaro A Obuku, the general secretary, Uganda Medical Association, said it is upon government actors and other stakeholders in the health sector to think of innovative mechanisms to increase the amount of money available to fund critical social services like the national health insurance.

"There has been a gap on the recruitment of health workers for a while because of something called the wage bill. But now with this National Health Insurance scheme Bill, we may get returns to enable members be recruited."

"So, we may have more doctors out there, we may have more nurses out there and that may help in as far as curbing unnecessary maternal death," Dr Obuku said.

The debate comes at a time when the National Insurance Scheme Bill intended to ensure universal health coverage in the country awaits to be discussed and approved by cabinet before it is tabled in Parliament.

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