

Affected. Dr Bugembe says there are nearly 1.2 million deaf people in Uganda who need the implant

BY STEPHEN WANDERA
wouma@ug.nationmedia.com

KAMPALA A team of surgeons have carried out the first ever inner ear operation in the country at Mulago National Referral Hospital in Kampala.

Dr Abubakar Bugembe, a consultant, ear nose, and throat (ENT) surgeon, said the surgery that is medically known as cochlear implant is being undertaken by a joint ENT specialist team from Uganda, Kenya, Egypt, and Austria.

"Previously, we've been treating and applying hearing aids on patients' ears who could not hear well. Those who cannot hear at all, especially children, would be referred to the school for the deaf to learn sign language. Today, we have this pioneer programme (operation) that we are to roll out to cover the entire country if funds are available," he said.

"A cochlear implant is a small electronic device that electrically stimulates the cochlear nerve (nerve for hearing). It then processes the sound and transmits it to the internal part of the implant. The internal part is placed under the skin behind the ear during an outpatient surgery," Dr Bugembe said.

The outer device is later configured to the inner one for one to start hearing.

Dr Nathan Nanjaya, who is part of the Ugandan team, said: "We started on Wednesday and will end on Friday with the launch of the National Cochlear Implant Programme, a collaboration between Mulago and Med-El Medical Electronic at Sheraton Hotel."

Dr Bugembe said the team is currently operating on three children and a doctor, with each operation

Mulago hospital conducts first inner ear operation



Surgery. Specialist doctors after a successful operation on a child at Mulago Hospital yesterday. PHOTO: BY STEPHEN WANDERA

taking between one to five hours and the patient monitored for some days before discharged.

"The only challenge is that the operation is expensive. Each operation costs nearly \$15,000 (about Shs51 million) when done locally here. But most of the patients are poor, so we call on government, donors, and non-governmental organisations to join us in this noble cause," he added.

Asked how widespread the problem is, Dr Bugembe said there are nearly 1.2 million deaf people in

Uganda who need the implant.

He said the problem is inherited from parents, especially those who intermarry with close family members.

Shs51m

Cost. The cost of the operation when carried out locally.

"Children who are not vaccinated, or have meningitis or high fever and use quinine as a drug for malaria are

prone to hearing impairment," Dr Bugembe added.

Dr Ali K. Mahrous, a professor of otology and neurotology, who has 15 years' experience in England, and now practicing at Cure Centre in Cairo, said the operation would provide the much needed training for local doctors and that more of them would be inducted.

The hearing devices are supplied by Med-El Medical Electronic represented by Africa Development and Regional Manager, Mr Mohamed El Disouky.