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Experts call for more sensitisation on Hepatitis

By Sarah Maziwe

Experts have called for more sensitisation on Hepatitis B, revealing that most members of the public have limited knowledge about the disease.

The health practitioners also decried the high costs for screening, which has in many cases hindered treatment.

Speaking during the Viral Hepatitis Symposium at Imperial Royale Hotel in Kampala yesterday, Dr. Kenneth Opio from Kiruddu Hospital, said the cost of testing is expensive for an average Ugandan.

"This means many people cannot afford testing in order to be put on medication. This explains why many people with the disease report to health facilities when the disease is in its late stages," he said.

"Treating them without proper diagnosis of the level of the virus would be wastage of resources," he added during the event attended by health professionals and organised by the National Organisation for People Living with Hepatitis B (NOPLHB) and Uganda Gastroenterology Society.

Dr Opio recommended that government negotiates with manufacturers/suppliers of diagnostic testing ingredients and also distribute them in different health facilities in order to bring the costs down.

The tests

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines for prevention, care and treatment for people with chronic Hepatitis B infection, one has to carry out viral load and liver function tests to determine whether one should be put on medication or not.

After a person has been screened for Hepatitis B and is found positive, the individual is not immediately put on medication, but subjected to more tests.

Further tests are done to ascertain the viral load of the disease (Hepatitis B) and if the patient's viral load is found to be above 2,000 IU/ml, they are immediately started on treatment.

Viral load is the measurement of the amount of a virus in an organism, typically in the blood stream, usually

BETWEEN THE LINES:

■ Hepatitis B is an infection of the liver. It is mainly spread when people come in contact with the blood, open sores or body fluids of someone who has the Hepatitis B virus.

stated in virus particles per millilitre.

What is Hepatitis B?

This is an infection of the liver. It can cause scarring of the organ, liver failure and liver cancer. It is incurable and once one tests positive, treatment is for life as is with HIV/AIDs.

It is mainly spread when people come into contact with the blood, open sores or body fluids of someone who has the Hepatitis B virus.

Hepatitis B remains a major public challenge in Uganda. The National Sero Survey of 2005 estimates that 3.5m Ugandans are living with chronic Hepatitis B.

The disease also accounts for 80% of liver cancer cases registered at the

Uganda Cancer Institute.

Prof. Ponsiano Ocama revealed that most people are not aware of the different types of Hepatitis viruses.

He explained that Hepatitis A and E are transmitted through ingestion of contaminated food and water, leading to acute infection, Hepatitis B, C and D cause chronic diseases such as cancer of the liver and cirrhosis of the liver.

Government's intervention

In 2014, the Government earmarked about sh2.7b to conduct immediate vaccination in 12 districts in northern Uganda, which has a Hepatitis B prevalence rate of over 20%.

In 2015, Government provided sh10b for vaccination in 30 districts and procurement of laboratory regiments for testing and medicines for treatment for Hepatitis B.

Three centres were also set up in Mulago, Adjumani and Arua national referral hospitals to screen, carry out tests and administer vaccines.

See related story on page 30 and 32

CORRECTION



The photo above, which appeared in New Vision yesterday, is of Uganda Peoples Defence Forces spokesperson, Brig. Richard Karemire and not the late Lt. Col. Richard Muhangi.

The New Vision strives to make its coverage accurate. If you have a question about the accuracy of our stories, contact us at: accuracy@newvision.co.ug or write to: The Accuracy Co-ordinator, The New Vision, P.O. Box 9815, Kampala