

HOW ALLEGED FAKE HEPATITIS VACCINES WERE STOLEN

BY CHARLES ETUKURI

The Hepatitis B vaccines that were confiscated by the National Drug Authority (NDA) in March this year and declared fake, were actually not. They actually belonged to National Medical Stores (NMS), but were diverted along the supply chain and sold to private medical facilities. Investigations have also indicated that because the vaccines which were stolen were not kept under cold storage as is required, they were damaged and their potency greatly compromised.

According to a detailed report by the NDA, which *Sunday Vision* saw, the confiscated vaccines were sent to UK laboratories, Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency for testing. More tests were carried out at the National Drug Quality Control Laboratory. Results indicate that they were

genuine and similar to the Hepatitis B vaccine (DNA) sent from the Serum Institute of India to Government health facilities. But, along the supply chain, they were diverted and sold to private medical facilities.

NDA has handed the matter over to the Police, which has launched an investigation. Sources privy to the investigations told *Sunday Vision* that Police is probing a number of officials from NMS and different hospitals across the country that were supposed to receive that particular batch.

Secretary to the authority, Donna Asiimwe Kusemererwa, told *Sunday Vision* they were working with the Police and that they had positively identified 18 suspects from the 18 medical centres and drug outlets where the falsified samples were found. She declined to comment on which

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Results indicate that the vaccines were similar to those sent from Serum Institute of India to Government health facilities

Government officials were under investigation.

“Ten case files have been opened so far at the Police” she noted. “One of the files has already been sanctioned and hearing took place on March 28. The suspect, Maclean Bira, linked to Mackie Laboratory in Kampala, was remanded to Luzira Prison. Other suspects have been arrested and a few are on the run. At this point, we do not wish to reveal the names for fear of compromising the investigation.”

The commissioner in charge of Narcotics, Tinka Zarugaba, who is investigating the case, told *Sunday Vision* that they would carry out an audit on NMS and all the hospitals that were supposed to receive this particular set.

It is that audit that will reveal who the suspects are and we shall definitely pick

them up,” Zarugaba said.

Routine post market surveillance visits by the NDA in March, discovered 48 stand-alone labels of the 10ml multi-dose Hepatitis B vaccine (DNA) manufactured by Serum were picked from High Street, Mbarara Municipality, while others were picked from Kampala. Among the clinics affected included Mayanja Memorial, Family Doctors Clinic in Ntungamo, Mbarara Community Hospital, Devine Mercy, Mbarara City Clinic, Uganda Medical Centre MC Hospital in Bukoto, Malcolm Health Centre Kisaasi, and Kampala Chambers on Buganda Road.

NDA noted that they had altogether confiscated 192 suspected 10ml units of Hepatitis B vaccine (DNA) purportedly manufactured by the Serum Institute of India. They also confiscated pre-printed vaccination cards

of Sanyu Medical Centre said to have been used during an immunisation camp at Mbarara University.

The stolen vaccines were found to comply with both the manufacturer and the United States Pharmacopeia (USP) specifications similar pH and extractable volume test results. The differences are observed in the external labelling. It was, therefore, observed that those who stole the vaccines interfered with the labels. The NDA also downplayed media reports that some of the patients who had received the vaccine had suffered adverse effects.

“So far, no adverse effect has been reported. The one reported by media was found to be untrue. Our investigations show that the patient’s swelling of the arm, about five centimetres below the injection site, was unrelated to the vaccine she received.”