

Ministry clarifies on cancer machine

By Jeff Andrew Lule

The Ministry of Health has refuted reports that the newly installed radiotherapy cancer machine has broken down again.

The response follows media reports alleging that the Cobalt 60 Radiotherapy machine at the Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI) was non-functional.

Addressing journalists at the Uganda Media Centre in Kampala yesterday, the acting director general of health services, Dr Henry Mwebesa, said the machine is still functioning, though not at full capacity.

He explained that with the guidance from the manufacturer, the operations of the machine had to be scaled down, in preparation for its first periodic servicing, which is scheduled for Thursday.

"The machine is still under warranty. Therefore, it is serviced free of charge by the manufacturer. The machine was approved by both the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Institute for Clinical Use," he said.

He noted that since the machine was installed in November last year, the number of patients treated per day increased from 10 in December, to 150 currently, while the number of treatment sessions rose from about 20 to 300 daily.

Mwebesa said about 1,000 patients have been treated since the restoration of the radiotherapy services at UCI and about 15,000 treatment sessions had been done.

He said the department now works in two shifts; from 5:00am to 1:30pm, while the second shift runs from 1:30pm to 10:30pm.

Dr Awusi Kavuma, the senior medical physicist at the radiotherapy department, said the machine is to resume normal operations on June 11, after being serviced.

"Currently, we can only accommodate 80% of the total patients we have been treating on a daily basis. The radioactive source is still high. That is why we want to reduce it so that the technician finds it low, to enable easy servicing. That is the reason we have scaled down the machine's operations," he explained.

He said the machine, according to the guidance from the manufacturer,

is supposed to be serviced every six months.

"On Friday, the machine will not be in use, but we shall be treating our patients using the internal radiotherapy machines and giving other treatments," Awusi explained.

Mwebesa noted that the Government has also supported the training of three local radiotherapy technicians, who are currently training in Zambia and are expected back in the country in March next year.

He said the construction of additional bunkers with six chambers which will house four linear accelerator

radiotherapy machines was nearing completion.

According to the Uganda Cancer Institute, over 4,000 new cancer cases were registered in Uganda last year, with prostate cancer ranking high in men, whereas breast and cervical cancer were leading in women. Out of every 100,000 people in Uganda, 300 are suspected to have cancer.

The World Health Organisation states that globally, nearly one in six deaths are due to cancer and approximately 70% of deaths from cancer occur in low and middle-income countries.



The executive director of Uganda Cancer Institute, Jackson Orem, unveiling the new radiotherapy machine to the media at the radiotherapy department in Mulago in November last year