

# Thousands stranded as doctors strike

By Vision Reporters

"You can only access care if you are bleeding or about to give birth. Doctors are not working, they have closed some of the wards, they have told us to come back next week," Jane Namusoke, a pregnant woman and a resident of Busega in Kampala said.

Namusoke, who *New Vision* found at the Women's Hospital, claimed she had seen people on the fourth floor picking up dead bodies.

The facilities at the fourth floor include a labour suite, theatre and a section for premature babies, among others. *New Vision* was unable to independently confirm the death claims.

"My sister has a problem with her heart and we wanted to find out what is wrong and receive treatment, but doctors are moving in circles. Most patients have been abandoned to die in the wards," a carer, also at the hospital in Kawempe, said.

At Mulago Hospital's casualty wing, Sandra Owino, 38, complained that she had brought her sister for an ECG (recording the electrical activity of the heart) at 8:00am, but was still in the queue by 12:30pm.

Namusoke and Owino were among the thousands of patients in public hospitals across the country that were stranded following a strike by the medical workers demanding a pay rise and better working conditions.

The strike, which entered its second day yesterday, paralysed health services in virtually most of the public hospitals and health centres visited by *New Vision* across the country.

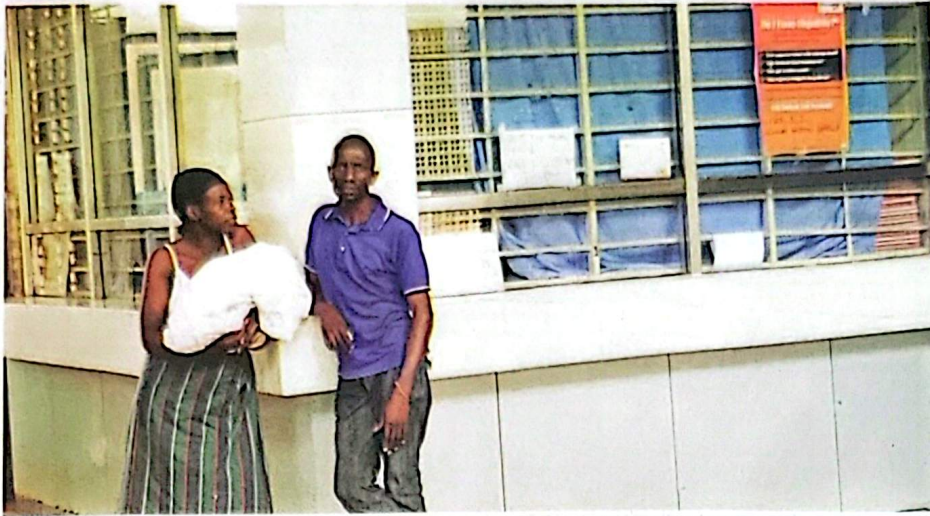
The Uganda Medical Association (UMA) resolved to stage the strike starting Monday this week, demanding an increase in salaries and duty allowances, review of the supply chain and management of medicines, vaccines and medical supplies, as well as disbandment of the State House Medicine and Health Service Delivery Monitoring Unit.

Dr Sarah Opendi, the state minister of health in charge of general duties, yesterday warned medics that they will be held responsible for any death occurring due to negligence.

"If we find out that there was any death out of negligence, we shall take action. The officer in charge will be held responsible," Opendi said yesterday. She said the medics had promised to handle emergencies.

"We call upon the public to go to the hospitals because clinical officers and midwives are on duty and can handle some situations," Opendi said.

Asked whether the Government would consider deploying military medics at the hospitals, Opendi conceded that army doctors



A couple standing outside one of the closed units of Naguru Hospital in Kampala after doctors went on strike over inadequate pay yesterday. Doctors have said they would only be treating emergencies and expectant mothers

are few and cannot cover all hospitals across the country.

Dr Diana Atwine, the health ministry permanent secretary, urged the medics to return to work. She said the Government was ready to deal with the issues raised by the medics, but as part of the broader salary review expected to be completed later this month.

But Prof. Pauline Byakika, the UMA deputy chairperson, said the strike will continue until the Government addresses their demands.

"The medical profession is a calling, but it does not mean that we remain poor," Byakika said.

## Kampala

At the Women's Hospital in Kawempe, *New Vision* team witnessed hospital staff telling pregnant women who sought antenatal care to go away and report back to the hospital next week.

At Naguru Hospital, the registry, cashier and pharmacy's sections which are always swamped by patients were closed and a few nurses were seen around, but not attending to anyone.

Sylvia Alowo, 30, an expectant mother of four from Kireka said she was rushed to the hospital in pain by 8:00am, but by 12:00pm, no one had attended to her.

Margaret Apolot said: "I had come for a brain CT scan, but I have been told no one will attend to me. I do not know what to do. I am in pain."

"But I support the doctors regarding the strike. They work so hard, but are paid peanuts, yet MPs who do nothing are paid a lot of money, that is not fair."

Edward Mwanje, the Naguru Hospital administrator, said they were to hold a crisis meeting to discuss how to handle the situation.

At Kiswa Health Centre II, Nakawa division, the medical

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workers were on duty. Some of the patients told *New Vision* they had received treatment.

At Kisugu Health Centre, in Makindye division, one of the health workers said although they have not been paid for the last two months, they have no choice, but to continue working.

"We are not on strike, but we have not been paid for the last two months," she said.

## Iganga

There was panic inside the female ward in Iganga Hospital after an HIV positive woman threatened to commit suicide after discovering that there were no health workers to provide anti-retroviral drugs. Another patient offered her a dose of the anti-retroviral drugs.

At Busega Health Centre IV, patients were stranded and some decided to go to the

private clinics in the vicinity.

"I have no other option, but take my sick child elsewhere for help. We came here at 10:00am when she was vomiting, up to now no medical worker has shown up," remarked Geoffrey Kaita, a resident of Butende village.

At Iganga General Hospital located in Iganga municipality, patients were seen leaving and heading to the nearby private units after waiting in vain for medics. Bodaboda riders had a field day transporting patients to private health centres in the area.

Dr Steven Waako, the medical superintendent, explained that as members of UMA they were bound by the decision on industrial strike.

"We have a skeleton staff to attend to emergencies such as accidents or complicated deliveries. Otherwise, the rest of the patients are not to be

attended to," Waako said.

Dr David Muwanguzi, the district health officer, called for a quick resolution of the matter. "It is a rather unfortunate decision (strike) to make as it would affect a lot of people. My prayer is that it is resolved as soon as possible to allow normality return to our health facilities," Muwanguzi said.

According to Muwanguzi, Iganga Hospital attends to over 400 patients daily. These include about 100 in-patients.

## Fort Portal

At Fort Portal Hospital, only clinical officers and the nursing assistants were attending to patients with minor complications.

"I have not seen any doctor since morning. I did not know that they were striking. I was told by an *askari*," Joy Kabugho, a resident of Kagote, said. The most affected were the people living with HIV/AIDS. They found it hard to access anti-retroviral drugs or other services such as the CD4 count.

"I have been getting my drugs from Fort Portal Hospital, but today I found it closed and I was told that doctors are on strike," Florence Kansime said. She said she was supposed to see the doctor to assess her CD4 count before she can be recommended for another dose of drugs.

At Kibiito Health Centre IV in Bunyangabu district, several patients were also turned away. "We are only attending to those with minor cases, but patients with major complications we have turned them away," Gloria Kajumba, a nursing assistant, said.

## Nebbi Hospital

At Nebbi Hospital, the wards were open, but with no staff member on duty.

"I have spent almost three hours here, but received no attention," said Rose Acen,

a resident of Jukla, in Nebbi municipality.

"I am in pain, but nobody is willing to offer me help," said Alfred Okello.

Dr Justine Okwairwoth, the Nebbi Hospital superintendent, declined to comment on the situation.

Gilbert Onenkan, the senior administrator at the hospital, said: "We have only one doctor and that means some area will automatically be lacking his services."

He argued though, that all the staff were on duty. But *New Vision* learnt that health workers were attending to emergencies only.

## Lira

Only a few interns and student nurses were seen attending to the patients who were on admission before the strike kicked off.

Patients gathered in the out-patient department as early as 6:30am and lined-up, waited for medical personnel to attend to them in vain.

Dr Mark Okwir told journalists that they were not going to handle new patients during this time.

"The strike has already started. We have a few interns inside treating only patients who were already on the wards before the strike. We shall also work on emergencies because as doctors we do not want to see people dying," Okwir said.

He said Lira Hospital is supposed to have 44 doctors, but they have only 15 doctors.

Most of the beds in wards were empty with only patients who claimed to have no transport to go back to their homes.

## Kaberamaldo district

At Kaberamaldo Health Centre IV, Angella Ariso, an expectant mother from Obaa trading centre said she was going back home after being told that she was not going to be attended to.

The out-patient department, laboratory and theatre sections were closed.

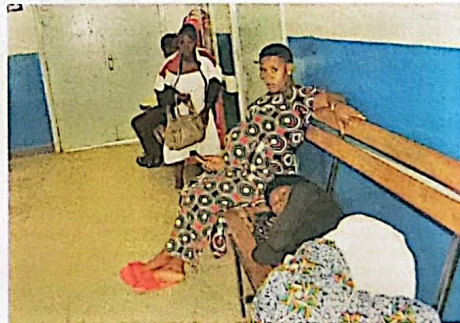
No health worker was present at the time *New Vision* visited the health unit.

In the general ward for adults, only one male patient, Retired Rev. Joshua Ejotu, admitted two days ago was still in the ward. His daughter, Agnes Anubi, said they were last attended to a day ago.

In the children's ward Lea Inera said her son had also not been attended to in over a day. "I cannot take back my son. I would rather remain with him here even if other people have gone. God will intervene," she said.

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Patients stranded at a hospital