

Police officers ignorant of anti-tobacco legislation

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KAMPALA. Police officers have said government failure to educate them about the Tobacco Control Act, 2015, has stifled their ability to enforce the law.

The Act, which aims to protect non-smokers from the devastating health effects of tobacco such as cancer, prohibits smoking in all public places and other outdoor spaces within a radius of 50 metres.

Although Health minister Jane Ruth Aceng while announcing the implementation of the Act in May last year, rallied enforcement agents, including police, to swing into action by educating the public and businesses about the law, some police officers have expressed ignorance of the law.

The Jinja Road Division police commander, Mr Moses Eliau, yesterday said they are as ignorant about the law as the public, making it difficult for them to enforce it.

"What should have been done was to educate the officers first about the law," Mr Eliau said at a meeting organised by Uganda National Health Consumers' Organisation (UNHCO) to audit the implementation of the legislation.

“Police do not have knowledge to enforce the Act. All they have is bits and pieces which makes it very hard for them to confront the person [found breaking the law].” MOSES ELIAU, JINJA ROAD DIVISION POLICE COMMANDER

Since the Act came into force two years ago, Dr Sheila Ndyabangi, the principal medical officer in the Ministry of Health, said no one has been prosecuted, wondering where police puts the suspects they have been arresting during the several operations they have been conducting.

"It [enforcement] is a question of just attitude on the side of the police. We shall do our best to train enforcers, but can't reach out to everyone. The problem is that they [officers] want to be called to workshops to be trained and paid after," Dr Ndyabangi said.

She also faulted police officers of failing to execute their job, saying it was their responsibility to study the law the moment the President assented to it.

Noncompliance with the provisions of the law could lead to punishments such as imprisonment for not more than seven years or fines of not less than Shs4.5m.

Mr Moses Talibita, the legal officer at UNHCO, said the police inaction in enforcement of the tobacco law has frustrated their efforts because the Force cannot operate on its own unless the latter teams up with them.