

Children diagnosed with diabetes

Recently, a donation of half a million syringes for children with diabetes type 1, was made through Sonia Nabela Foundation - an organisation that raises awareness about the disease in Uganda. Lillian N. Magezi caught up with Dr Thereza Piloya-Were, a paediatric endocrinologist (specialist in treating hormone-related conditions among children) and also the board director at the foundation to throw more light on Type 1 diabetes.

What is type 1 diabetes? How does it differ from type 2 diabetes?

Type 1 diabetes is a disease where one's immune system attacks the insulin-producing cells in the pancreas and it stops producing hormone.

Insulin is a hormone that assists the body to break down glucose into energy. On the other hand, Type 2 diabetes is a condition where the pancreas still produces insulin, but it does not work well in the body cells. It is also called resistance to insulin. Type 1 is common in children (90%) and Type 2 diabetes mostly affects adults.

What is the prevalence of Type 1 diabetes in Uganda?

The prevalence is unknown

because studies have not been done. In addition, many children die before diagnosis, more are to be diagnosed due to lack of awareness. From the 25 diabetes clinics, we are treating over 1,000 children with Type 1 diabetes.

To what extent are members of the public aware of the condition?

The general public is aware about diabetes in adults; however, they are ignorant about it in children. Many believe that diabetes is the disease of the old so when a child is diagnosed with diabetes, the first reaction is usually denial and many people run away from health workers to seek a second opinion. Communities and schools also lack awareness to



Dr Piloya-Were showing children with diabetes how to administer insulin

support the children.

What challenge does the low level of awareness pose?

After diagnosis, which in Ugandan is usually done when the child is in diabetic (a life-threatening condition when cells in the body are unable to get the sugar (glucose) they need for energy because there is not enough

The World Health Day was celebrated on April 7 under the theme *Universal health coverage: everyone everywhere*, one group that stood out at the event were children living with diabetes. While the Government and some NGOs offer free medication to the children, it was observed that the medicine can only be administered through injections. The

biggest challenge the children face is lack of access to syringes of the right size. As a result, many children have had to use adult-size syringes, which cause complications such as bleeding and swelling. Becton Dickinson, an American pharmaceutical company, recently donated half a million syringes to Ugandan children living with Type 1 diabetes.

insulin), the child needs to get on treatment right away. But many times, the lack of awareness causes delay in treatment with life-threatening complications.

In addition, those on drugs usually interrupt treatment as they seek other opinions. For instance sometimes, children are taken to shrines. These interruptions also lead to life-threatening complications and death.

How well is the condition diagnosed among Ugandans?

Many more children and adolescents are being diagnosed. However, many come in late. They are first treated for common ailments such as malaria and urinary tract infections before they are diagnosed with diabetes.

What has led to the improvement?

We have trained more health workers. There are also improved diagnostic supplies in the country on both public and private health facilities. Early diagnosis means early treatment, reducing chances of death and complications.

What does treatment involve?

Treatment involves use of injectable insulin and regularly testing blood sugar using a glucometer and strips

Unfortunately, in child syringes are the only way of administering insulin. In Western countries insulin can be delivered using a pump, but in Uganda Africa as a whole and in developing countries, insulin is administered through syringes. Tablets are also

How will the patients access the syringes? They are donated by the Sonia Nabela Foundation. They will use the same syringes they have been using. They will acquire their insulin from the 25 diabetes clinics in the country so that only getting the insulin are the same ones getting syringes.

What tips do you give people to ensure safe use of syringes?

They are encouraged to use the syringes after use in a container and bring them to hospital for safe disposal.

What tips on diet do you give children with Type 1 diabetes?

Children are encouraged to feed on the same diet as the rest of the family as long as it is balanced. We do not encourage special diets for children with diabetes. However, they should take insulin injection with the glucose. Vegetables, fruits, carbohydrates (maize, posho, millet, potatoes, cassava etc) and proteins (lean meat, chicken, legumes and groundnuts etc) are acceptable.

What else needs to be done?

Several things, including improved advocacy, training health workers and increasing awareness among the public. There is need to formulate policies and guidelines on treatment in addition to more research in diabetes.

to see how one is faring.

How easily can treatment be accessed in Uganda?

Currently insulin for treatment of children is available free-of-charge through the health ministry and a project, Changing Diabetes in Children. On the open market, insulin costs between sh30,000 and sh150,000.

Are syringes the only way of administering insulin? Can't one take tablets?



Strip for testing diabetes are not easily accessed

Challenges in Type 1 diabetes treatment

- Lack of awareness in the home, community and school
- Education and psychosocial support for patients is not readily available
- Limited number of trained diabetes management team (counsellors, nurses, doctors etc)
- Poverty makes diabetes a costly disease. Medical supplies and dieting costs money, making treatment expensive
- Government does not provide necessary management kits such as strips and glucometers for tests
- Syringes for children are not easily accessible

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