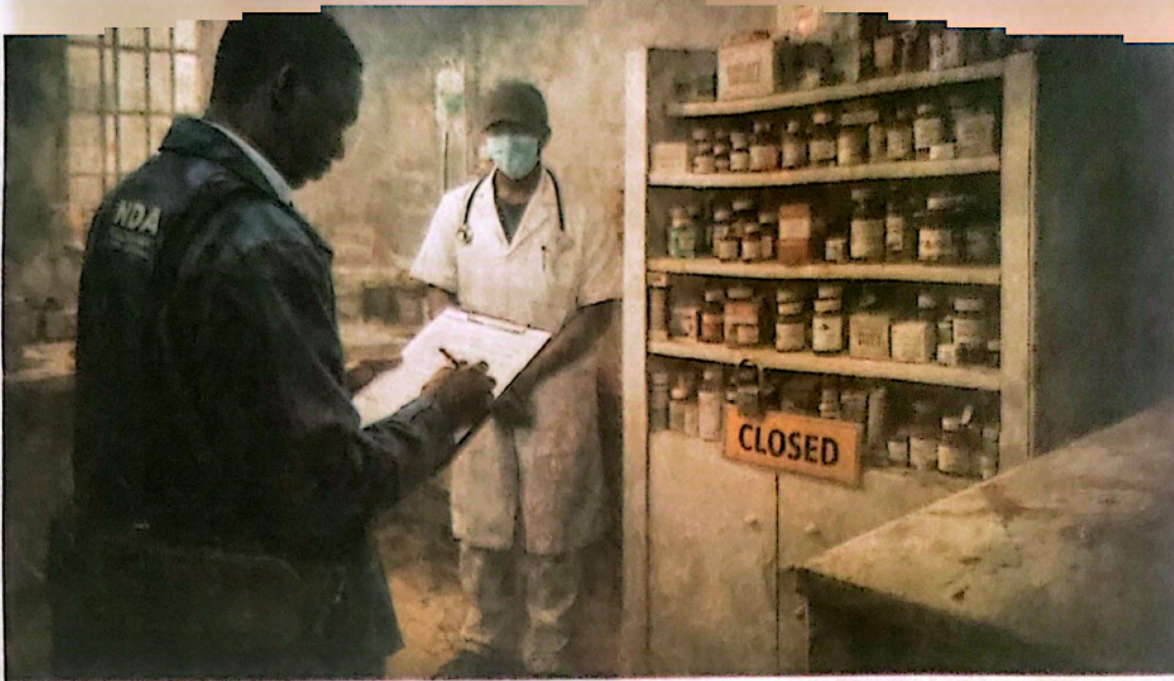




Licensing a drug shop requires a certificate of suitability of premises, evidence of a qualified officer-in-charge (pharmacist or health professional), and submission of completed application forms with fees. PHOTO/Al

Who is really treating you? The truth about illegal clinics

Unlicensed clinics and drug shops are operating across Uganda, selling unauthorised medicines and offering risky procedures. Authorities are cracking down, but patients continue to face serious health dangers from fake doctors and substandard care.

BY GEOFFREY OYET OKWERA

In 2024, Ken Nyombi, alias Dr Innocent Ssemanda, was arrested, arraigned before the courts, and remanded to Luzira Prisons following a decade of impersonating a licensed medical doctor. He was implicated in a botched surgery that left a patient with serious complications.

Investigations revealed that Ssemanda allegedly used a disguised identity, leveraging the credentials and details of a genuine doctor to fraudulently obtain professional documents. He reportedly used these forged credentials to operate a private health facility and even attend Ministry of Health training sessions under false pretences.

His scheme was eventually uncovered, leading to his arrest and prosecution. The exposure of the alleged fraud subsequently resulted in the closure of the Cleveland Specialised Clinic in Kasangati, Wakiso District.

Further inquiries pointed to multiple cases of medical procedures gone wrong and alleged misdiagnoses that

are said to have worsened the health conditions of several patients, raising renewed concerns about regulation and oversight, especially in private health facilities.

This scenario underscores the urgent need for heightened vigilance and routine supervision of health facilities across the country. Regular inspections, strict credential verification, and closer monitoring by regulatory authorities are essential in safeguarding patients from unqualified practitioners.

Such measures would help continually unmask impostors who infiltrate this critical sector under false pretences, posing as trained professionals yet lacking the competence and ethical grounding required in medical practice. Strengthening oversight mechanisms, enforcing tougher penalties, and promoting whistleblowing within health institutions can go a long way in restoring public trust and protecting lives.

The crackdown on illegal drug shops Recently in northern Uganda, the National Drug Authority (NDA) intensi-

fied operations, closing 45 illegal drug shops and impounding 189 boxes of assorted medicines worth an estimated Shs125m. The effort forms part of broader attempts to eliminate unlicensed practitioners, protect public health, and restore confidence in regulated medical services.

NDA also spearheaded operations in north eastern Uganda, shutting down more than 105 illegal drug outlets. The crackdown targeted districts including Kaberamaido, Ngara, Kapelebyong, Kalaki, and Soroti, where authorities seized approximately 260 boxes of assorted classified medicines valued at about Shs65m.

Crack down

As a result, NDA heightened enforcement operations across northern and north eastern Uganda, closing illegal clinics and drug outlets to protect public health. Authorities have since continued to crack down on illegal drug shops across the region, leading to significant closures and drug seizures.

On February 27, 2026, NDA conducted a compliance enforcement operation targeting illegal drug outlets in the central region districts of Nyerera, Rakai, Lwengo, and Kalungu. The operation uncovered 35 drug outlets operating in unauthorised and unlicensed premises, many run by unqualified personnel illegally stocking and selling government drugs and medical devices.

As a result of the crackdown, 15 boxes

WHO WARNING

●According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), unlicensed health facilities and unauthorised drug sellers are a major threat to patient safety worldwide.

●WHO emphasises that substandard and falsified medicines can cause treatment failure, adverse reactions, and even death.

●WHO recommends:

- Strict licensing and regulation of all health facilities.
- Regular inspections and public reporting mechanisms.
- Public awareness campaigns to help citizens identify safe, qualified healthcare providers.

●In Uganda, government crackdowns and the 2026 NDA licensing cycle align with WHO's global guidance, aiming to reduce illegal operations and protect patients.

es of assorted medicines valued at more than Shs37.5m were impounded. NDA reiterated its commitment to safeguarding public health by ensuring that only licensed premises operated by qualified personnel dispense medicines.

Abiaz Rwamwiri, the public relations officer of the NDA, says the legal mandate to license drug shops in Uganda rests solely with the authority. Earlier this year, NDA

The 2026 licensing cycle opened, with NDA urging operators to comply with regulations. Rwamwiri explains that the authority primarily regulates pharmacies and pharmaceuticals nationwide. Strict licensing aims to protect the public from unqualified dealers who threaten lives through the sale of counterfeit or unauthorised medicines.

Licensing guidelines for drug shops According to NDA, licensing a shop requires a certificate of suitability of premises, evidence of a qualified officer-in-charge (pharmacist or health professional), and submission of completed application forms with fees.

"All pharmacies must be registered as a business, partnership, or company, and the in-charge must be a registered pharmacist," Rwamwiri says. "They must also meet strict requirements of layout, storage, and premises before the pharmacist obtains a certificate of suitability."

Licenses issued to drug shops and pharmacies are valid for three years, subject to strict regulatory requirements, including maintaining a minimum distance of 10 metres from another licensed facility.

"We are strengthening our surveillance and intelligence to continue cracking down on illegal drug shops and pharmacies across Uganda," Rwamwiri adds. "Renewed vigilance aims to safeguard the public from unlicensed operations where substandard medicines are dispensed by untrained personnel."

Although NDA impounds medicines from operators without valid licenses, confiscated drugs may be returned to shops fully compliant with licensing requirements, provided the medicines have not expired and are deemed safe. The approach enforces compliance while preventing unnecessary wastage of medicines.

Procurement of drugs

Sheila Nduhukire, the principal procurement officer at the National Medical Store (NMS), says procurement of medicines is the sole responsibility of NMS. The agency sources and supplies quality-assured medicines and health supplies to accredited facilities, in line with national regulations. "To avoid engaging third parties, we coordinate with districts through their health officers. Once paperwork is complete, we can deliver within 24 hours," Nduhukire explained.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health warns against doctors diverting drugs from government facilities to private clinics, which risks cancellation of licenses and prosecution.

Emmanuel Ainebyoona, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Health, notes that the Allied Health Professionals Council (AHPC) is responsible for regulating clinics and private health centres. He emphasises, "We strongly condemn illegal operations and urge the public to remain vigilant. When visiting a clinic, be sure to look for displayed certificates and avoid unlicensed facilities."

Ainebyoona commends AHPC's crackdown on illegal clinics and medical centres to eliminate unprofessionalism and safeguard public health. He stresses that enforcement, including prosecution and seizure of medicines or equipment, will continue until all legal operators are held accountable.