

Two companies probed over suspected fake Hepatitis drug

By Betty Amamukirori

The Ministry of Health and the National Drug Authority (NDA) are investigating two companies over the supply of the suspected fake Hepatitis B vaccines to private health facilities around the country.

But the health ministry says the vaccines could actually have been genuine, but stolen from government health facilities and labels changed by unscrupulous people.

While addressing the media on Sunday, in the ministry's boardroom, Sarah Opendi, the state minister for health in charge of general duties, said during their market surveillance, they traced some of the counterfeit vaccines to Kumate Diagnostics Ltd Kampala and Forever Green Enterprises in Old Kampala.

She stated that they had established that Kumate is owned by two laboratory technicians who are not licensed to supply the vaccines while Forever Green is non-existent and the name could have been forged by unscrupulous people to dupe Ugandans.

The eight health facilities found with the suspicious vaccines bought them from the above companies and other unlicensed dealers with fake addresses on the invoices and receipts. The clinics in which the vaccines were found include Mbarara Community Hospital, Divine Mercy, Mayanja Memorial, Family Doctors Clinic Ntungamo, Mbarara City Clinic, UMC Hospital Bukoto, Malcolm Health Care Kisaasi and Kampala Medical Chambers, Buganda Road.

The vaccines are currently available in the districts of Mbarara, Mbale, Wakiso and Kampala.

UMC Bukoto has come out to say they were supplied by the Joint Medical Stores (JMS) and do not have the fake vaccines. However, its claim was refuted by the NDA manager central region, Muhammad Lukwago, who told journalists that they visited the clinic and found the fake vaccines.

Opendi said they trust JMS' statement that they never supplied



Some of the counterfeit hepatitis B vaccines that were confiscated. File photo

the clinic. She added that they even contacted the Serum Institute of India to verify the batch numbers, but they too denied ever supplying the vaccines.

Vaccines might be genuine

Opendi also told journalists that the suspicious vaccines could actually be genuine and only re-labelled for monetary gain.

"The vaccine could be genuine. From the ones we have in our possession, it seems they just tried to scratch off the words 'Government of Uganda. Not for sale'. They could have stolen them from government hospitals and sold them to the clinics," she said.

The state health minister stated that according to preliminary investigations, the vaccines are not harmful. So far three suspects have been arrested over the matter.

Medard Bitekyerezo, the NDA chairman, said they are going to take

ON THE GROUND

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stringent action against the health facilities involved. The ministry has directed NDA to recall the roml vial of the vaccine from Serum Institute of India from all private facilities for testing to establish the contents.

Members of the public are advised to receive the vaccines from accredited private and government health facilities. These include Nsambya, Kibuli, Mengo, Rubaga, International Hospital Kampala (IHK), Norvik, Case

and Nakasero Hospital.

"We shall advise the public on other facilities that have been cleared for Hepatitis B vaccination in two weeks," Opendi said.

The ministry has also suspended vaccination camps for Hepatitis B by private providers until cleared by it and has directed district health officers and RDCs to ensure that the directive is complied with.

The accredited suppliers include Biological E represented by Gittoes, Glaxo SmithKline represented by Eris Ltd, Human Biologicals Institute represented by TATA (U), LG Life Sciences, Sanofi Pasteur & Pasteur Merieux represented by Laborex, Serum Institute of India represented by Norvik Enterprises and Shantha Biotec represented by Laborex.

Currently, the prevalence of Hepatitis B infection among adults in Uganda stands at 4.3% (5.6% among men and 3.1% among women).