

Immunisation cards compulsory for school admission

BY VISION REPORTERS

THE immunisation card is now mandatory for admission to day care centres, pre-primary or primary schools. According to the Immunisation Act, 2017, which has now come into force, a school shall not admit a child unless an immunisation card certifying that the required immunisations were given to the child is produced.

Bernard Opa, the programme manager Uganda National Expansion Programme on Immunisation (UNEPI), says research has revealed a high population of unimmunised children, prompting the legislation.

"There are a number of children whose immunisation status could not be confirmed because the parents could not prove that they had been immunised, as they had no cards," he says.

According to the legislation passed by Parliament last year, diseases for which immunisation is compulsory include Hepatitis B, tuberculosis, diphtheria, tetanus, haemophilus influenza, polio and whooping cough.

Opa points out a number of reasons that are impeding immunisation coverage ranging from education levels, economic factors and religious factors.

"Children of the less educated are less likely to be immunised compared to the children born to the educated. The religious sects, such as the 666, who are gaining ground around the country, do not believe in immunisation. Also, parents are more preoccupied with finding ways to make money to feed the children,

**BERNARD OPA,
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as opposed to ensuring that they are vaccinated and protected. These and many other issues are limiting immunisation," Opa explains.

Consequently, he notes that the two ways the Government can encourage immunisation is by providing the service and legislation.

PUNITIVE ACTION

"If a parent takes the child who has not been immunised to a school and the headteacher admits them, the headteacher will be fined. Equally, there is provision for punishment of a parent who does not take a child for immunisation," Opa says.

According to the Act, a person who contravenes the section commits an offence and is liable, on conviction, to a fine not exceeding 12 currency points (currency point is sh20,000) or imprisonment not exceeding six months or both.

NOT AWARE

While the school heads around the city seem to be aware of the law and

have actually had the immunisation cards among the key requirements for admission, those upcountry are unaware. Henry Stanley Okia, headteacher of Naalya Primary School, says since the school started in 2002, it has been compulsory for those seeking admission to avail the immunisation cards.

"To us, the growth and development of a child is key and those years between two and five are crucial. We have not had any cases of parents who have failed to present their children's immunisation card," Okia says.

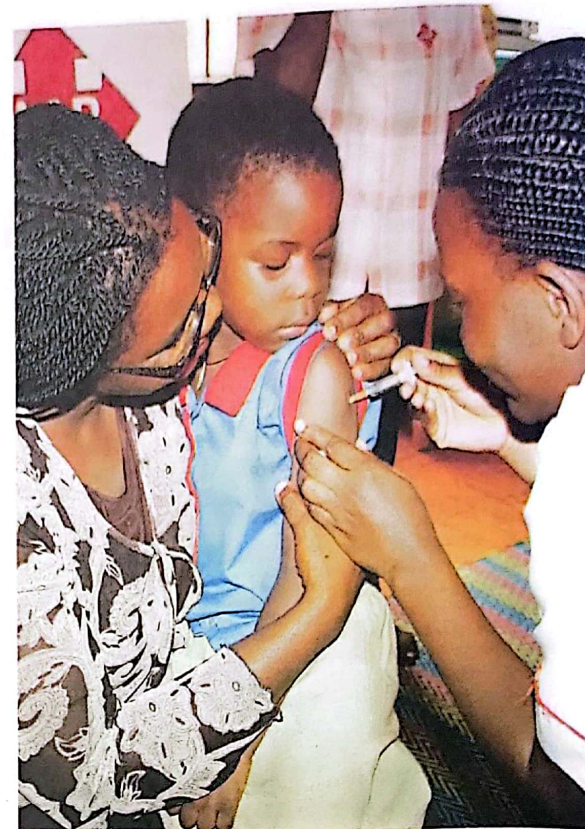
Similarly, Stephen Mawanda, the head of admissions at Aga Khan Primary School says one of their requirements for admission is full vaccination, because when children are not fully immunised, their studies are negatively affected when they fall ill.

"The child is coming from a small unit family to a wider unit of people and could easily pick these infections up," Mawanda says.

However, Christine Kiwanuka, the headmistress of Bishop Willis Demonstration School in Iganga district, says there is no consideration for immunisation cards during admissions.

"This is a public school under the Universal Primary Education programme, so the gates are open to all. We have not yet been instructed to stop children from enrolling due to lack of such cards," Kiwanuka says.

Esther Nandase, the headmistress of Buckley High School in Iganga, explains that it is a prerequisite for pupils to present medical records on admission, but it is not compulsory.



Parents will be required to take their children for vaccination and keep records for the school administration

"Usually, immunisation cards accompany such documents. However, it is not a strict rule that every child must have it," Nandase adds.

Nathan Mugume, the headmaster of Mbarara Junior School, also says the school does not consider immunisation cards as a part of admission requirements.

"We assume by the time parents bring their children to school, they have done their part of immunisation. This policy has only encouraged parents to immunise their children," Mugume notes.

Opa says the school heads are not aware because the regulations of the Act have not yet been disseminated. However, they will be disseminated

by the end of September.

Opa warns parents against being conned by school administrators who ask for money to carry out vaccinations at schools, because vaccinations are done for free at government health facilities.

He also refuted claims that private health facilities have been stopped from carrying out immunisation.

"Private facilities are still carrying out immunisation. Please do not go by reports from the Uganda National Association of Private Hospitals, because the association is not recognised," he said.

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