

Govt to buy new drug for sickle cell anaemia

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KAMPALA. The Minister of Health, Dr Jane Aceng, has directed the National Drug Authority to register hydroxyurea as a treatment for sickle cell anaemia in a move to increase the drug's availability and accessibility.

The drug that was developed to treat leukemia was also found to be effective in the management of sickle cell anaemia as it reduces occurrence of painful crises. It has been in use in US and Europe to manage sickle cell patients.

Dr Aceng, who was speaking at the launch of results of clinical trials of the drug yesterday in Kampala, asked NDA to expedite the process in at least three months to ensure the drug reaches all patients who need it for treatment.

"Our teams in the Non Communicable Disease department will work on the treatment policy changes and guidelines," Dr Aceng said, adding that government will work on its affordability.

Currently, hydroxyurea costs between Shs1,000 and Shs1,500 per capsule which is not affordable for most Ugandans.

How drug works

According to Mr Charles Ki-yanga, the national coordinator of the sickle cell anaemia in the Ministry of Health, hydroxyurea does not cure the disease but works like antiretroviral treatment among people living with HIV by prolonging their life span.

Dr Robert Opoka, a senior lecturer in the department of paediatrics and child health at Makerere University, said the drug reduces adverse effects such as acute chest syndrome, painful crisis, splenic sequestration or blood transfusions and frequent hospitalisation.

Mulago Hospital and Makerere University has just completed a study on the drug use in the country. Titled: "Novel use of Hydroxyurea in an African Region Malaria: A trail for children with Sickle cell anemia," the study was aimed at finding out whether hydroxyurea can be used in the malaria endemic sub-Saharan Africa, where the greatest sickle cell burden exists.

Dr Opoka said the drug provided significant clinical and laboratory benefits, adding that it would be safe and effective across the sub Saharan Africa.