

Cancer fight needs research on medical marijuana

IMMANUEL BEN MISAGGA > CANCER

Over the past few years, the scourge of cancer has emerged as one of the most deadly diseases, overtaking HIV/Aids in some aspects. The complexity of many cancers has forced many Ugandans to seek specialised treatment abroad yet our country is endowed with a variety of cancer fighting herbs that simply require more research and refinement to save thousands of cancer patients. One such remedy is medical marijuana, a herb whose powers in the fight against cancer is well-documented.

Due to the sensitivity of the topic, let me start with a disclaimer that I am not a medical professional and my views are based on research and observation from a personal experience as carer for a cancer patient.

Lydia Namazzi Sekatawa Njuki, my sister, had painfully battled cancer for just six months when early this year, she was recommended to be treated with a non-conventional approach to counter the worsening condition.

A medical form of marijuana was recommended for her, not only as painkiller, but also a stress reliever among other benefits. She was also categorically cautioned that it was not a cure.

I had my own misgivings based on the legal framework and cultural beliefs. Indeed, marijuana, in any form, is illegal in Uganda regardless of the fact that it is widely grown and used locally. So, we could only afford to use its medical remedy if she travelled to the US or India for the treatment.

I have become accustomed to seeing wasted youth puffing away marijuana, which is commonly known as weed. You would hardly come across anything positive about the substance. Nevertheless, I felt no reason why we shouldn't try it out.

We had made arrangements for her travel to Germany, but unfortunately, Namazzi ultimately lost her battle with the cancer on Saturday, March 10 before anything substantial could be done to prolong her life.

So, when I raised the issue about the need to try out medical marijuana during the requiem mass for Namazzi, I got a several nods of approval, but there remain many voices against such an attempt.

My brother Emmanuel Katongole, a man I respect due to his pharmaceutical background, notably opposed it.

Personally, I believe we should be liberal and open to any form of research, especially with the technologically-advanced capacity of the current generation.

It is against that background that I hope key stakeholders open up on this debate instead of shooting it down because 'marijuana is illegal', or that 'it is addictive' and 'people will get high.'

Every drug has a side effect if not used properly and in the case of marijuana, the only danger is landing into the wrong hands.

Isn't it weird that there is a lot of agitation on the Anti-Homosexuality Bill or the Domestic Relations Bill, but hardly any buzz about this important medical breakthrough that was recently endorsed by World Health Organisation (WHO)?

In the US, the medical use of marijuana is legal (with a doctor's recommendation) in 29 states, including New York, California and Washington. I believe it is just a matter of time before the rest of America follows.

> **My concern.** My appeal goes to President Museveni and Parliament as well as the relevant medical authorities, in particular the National Drug Authority (NDA), to consider medical marijuana as viable form of cancer treatment. Of course, this has to be based and preceded by a thorough research into its effectiveness. If we can spend Shs300 million on a porn detector machine, then we can invest 10 times more in medical marijuana.



It is because while our mentality focuses on the day-to-day aspects of life, medically-advanced countries are thinking on how to make use of Uganda's natural gift of herbs.

I have observed that cancer cases have drastically increased in recent years and this has pushed many Ugandans to medical limits of realising that many key ingredients in cancer drugs are actually home-grown in our backyards.

How can we continue to turn a blind eye to marijuana when it is a key ingredient to several therapies? For years, we have grown medicinal plants such as moringa and aloe vera, but it is only recently that Ugandans have extracted their medicinal properties for widescale commercial use.

So, I believe that the same backward mentality that stops us from processing our coffee is similar to our indifference to marijuana research.

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I am sure my sister could have lived to fight another day and this research may just save many lives out there.

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Rest in peace and in the paradise of God's wings, my beloved sister, Lydia Namazzi. Until we meet again.

Mr Misagga is the president, Sports club SC Villa and a concerned Ugandan