

Reason. According to Dr Orem, the move is intended to stop some health workers at the institute from extorting money from patients.

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KAMPALA. The Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI) is considering charging patients for using the new radiotherapy cancer treatment machine when it starts operating in October.

Treatment at public health facilities are offered free, but the charge is being mooted under a cost-cutting system at Mulago National Referral Hospital.

But Dr Jackson Orem, the executive director of UCI, could not state the amount patients are likely to be charged but said the move is intended to stop the practice of extorting money from patients by some health workers at the institute.

"We are discussing that because at the end of the day, this is still a new machine and may also come with requirements like servicing... that is why we want to come up with a formal figure if we are to levy any fees to help keep the machine running and also motivate the health worker..." Dr Orem told *Daily Monitor* in an interview on Monday. The new state-of-

Patients to pay for new cancer machine services

the-art Linear Accelerator machine that was bought at 642,000 Euros (more than Shs2.7b) by government and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), was shipped into the country last week to replace the old Cobalt 60 radiotherapy machine.

The old machine broke down on March 27, 2016, leaving nearly 2,000 patients without any alternative treatment with some of the patients dying in the process.

Previously, several patients have accused health workers, including radiotherapists who operate the machine, nurses and doctors at the cancer institute, of extorting money from them to access radiotherapy services which are meant to be free.

Some of the patients told *Daily Monitor* recently that they are often asked for Shs300,000 to Shs600,000, and occasionally up to Shs1 million for a full treatment which is usually 15 doses,

but said they could not report the perpetrators for fear of possible victimisation and denial of treatment.

But Dr Orem said with the arrival of the new machine, they are prepared to penalise whoever will be found culpable. "The problem is patients do not want to disclose... Why do they fear? I tell them please ... please and the few who have reported either a doctor or nurse to me; they have seen what I have done to them [culprits] and nothing has happened to them [patients]. I want to get the culprits," Dr Orem said.

Installation

On the installation of the new machine, Dr Orem said the process will start as soon as engineers from the Czech Republic where the machine was manufactured, arrive in the country this week.

"Even if the engineers came today,

the installation would start immediately. Installation might take around a month. They have to assemble everything, they have to test to ensure that everything is in good working condition but there are also a number of procedural things that have to be done which will be continuous in terms of paper work," the executive director said.

Dr Orem said the machine would arrive at the institute between Monday and Tuesday (yesterday), adding: "The renovated bunker is ready but there are other things we have to do".

"As I speak now (Monday), we brought back the contractor to do the final touches because some of those things could not be done when the machine was not there like the door is a bit small. They have to open it and the partitioning inside and then other minor things in the environment," he said.

Although Dr Orem denied that there are no patient backlog, radiotherapists at the institute said the new machine is likely to be overwhelmed.

"Certainly for a period of three to four months there will be so many patients for the machine but we shall handle them [the patients] the way they come," one of the radiotherapists who spoke on condition of anonymity, said.

"There are some [patients] who have already started calling and checking; thinking that the machine is already operational," the radiotherapist added.

But Dr Orem dismissed any claims of backlog of patients, saying they have since been sending patients to Nairobi, Kenya to receive radiotherapy treatment and have so far taken up only 200 of the 400 offers by the Aga Khan Hospital in Nairobi.

He said the machine that works 24 hours for seven days a week, is expected to handle between 30 to 70 patients a day. Despite the excitement about the arrival of the new machine, Ms Rebecca Mayengo, the chairperson of the Uganda Women's Cancer Organisation, expressed pessimism that it may not have much anticipated impact given the high number of patients expected to be served by the single machine in the country.