Govt expands access to free fistula care

By Vision Reporter

At least 19 hospitals countrywide are now equipped to offer free treatment for fistula, a debilitating condition linked to complications during childbirth.

Fistula is an abnormal opening between the birth canal and bladder or rectum of a woman that results in the constant leaking of urine or stool.

The condition usually arises from obstructed labour that lasts more than 24 hours during which an expectant mother is not assisted by a skilled health worker in time.

Statistics from the health ministry show that about 75,000 women of reproductive age are suffering from fistula in Uganda. The country registers about 1,900 fresh cases of fistula every year.

However, the existing facilities are capable of handling just 1,500 fistula repairs, leaving a huge backlog, according to Dr Charles Olaro, the director for clinical services at the health ministry.

"We have procured fistula repair equipment for all the facilities and training of teams for fistula, including surgeons, anesthetics and nurses to work as a team in each of the hospitals," he said.

The health facilities offering free fistula repairs are: Mulago National Referral Hospital, the regional referral hospitals of Mbarara, Mbale, Arua, Jinja, Fort Portal, Soroti, Masaka, Hoima and Moroto as well as seven mission hospitals of Kagando, Kitovu, Kamuli, Lacor, Kisiizi, Virika and Kumi.

Olaro said the expansion of new sites conducting fistula had significantly lowered the prevalence rate of fistula over the last five years, from 2% in 2011 to 1% by the end of 2016.

Uganda will join the rest of the world to mark the International Day to End Fistula tomorrow under the theme, *End Fistula, Reach Everyone*, at Kavule Primary School in Kibuku district.

According to Olaro, at least 23 surgeons have been trained to carry out fistula repair and most of the country's 13 regional referral hospitals have the capacity to handle simple fistula repairs.

Although the number of cases of fistula have seen a slight drop over the last five years (140,000 to 75,000), it will take many years to handle all the cases at the current rate.

Globally, more than two million young women live with untreated obstetric fistula in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa two million, according to the World Health Organisation.

The health ministry and partners are encouraging action against teenage pregnancy and pushing them to deliver at health facilities with the help of qualified health personnel.

"Women who give birth before the age of 20 face the greatest risk of fistula since the bones surrounding the birth canal are not fully grown and the baby may not be able to pass through it," Olaro explained.

Expectant mothers are also encouraged to seek family planning services and attend all antenatal visits so that medics can determine the appropriate procedure for childbirth.

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