

**Period.** Toward the festive season, men get excited, drink and smoke too much while some others are stressed about providing for their families in the festive days, according to Dr Basangwa

# Ugandans suffer mental illness

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**KAMPALA.** Majority Ugandans and particularly men - suffer mental breakdown or book into health facilities with mental illness-related complications during the festive season, this newspaper can reveal.

Our analysis of records at Butabika, the country's only national referral hospital for specialised psychiatric care, shows a year-to-year spike in the number of patients admitted between November and January.

The number of patients has more generally increased each successive year since 2010, a trend health workers attribute to growing population, better awareness and health-seeking behaviour contrasting earlier practices of people seeking healing at churches or shrines of traditional healers and witchdoctors.

The Butabika statistics do not capture mental illness cases handled at other health facilities or elsewhere and, as such, offers less-than-complete picture or burden of mental illness on the country and families such as loss of lives, disruptions from productive work and caregiving expenses.

For instance, a young man with a history of mental illness, but whose name we are withholding on the request of his family, after watching a video game reportedly committed suicide in Namugongo, near Kampala, on the eve of taking up a new job after staying unemployed for two months.

He was buried last Saturday amid growing concerns about the fate of other family members with similar conditions. And there are hundreds of Ugandan families in similar predicaments due to the unpredictable behaviour of mentally-ill patients and or recurrence of their condition.

On average 22,000 patients, more than half of them men, check at Butabika every November, December and January for conditions ranging

from alcohol and or drug abuse, bipolar disorder, depression, dementia, schizophrenia, epilepsy and bipolar, childhood mental and post-traumatic stress disorders. More women than men are admitted or treated as out-patients due to HIV-related psychosis.

In other months, slightly fewer patients seek treatment at the national referral hospital, according to its financial year-based data sets for 2013, 2014 and 2015 (ending June 2016).

Dr David Basangwa, the executive director of Butabika Hospital, said the numbers are highest towards end of year due to excitement and anxiety ahead of the festive season.

"Toward the festive season, men get excited, drink and smoke too much while some others [without means] are stressed about providing for their families in the festive days," he said.

There is another downside to the festive season; of families' budget overruns on merrymaking resulting in financial hardships when tuition and other school demands knock in late January or early February.

Uganda's patriarchal society has traditionally placed the responsibility of providing for the family on men and allowed them a freehand at fun, in part explaining their vulnerability to mental breakdown, although more empowered and financially-able women are increasingly sharing or singularly picking family expense and, with it, stress.

In January, 2013, Butabika registered 13,303 male patients the highest number in the entire year. Men comprised more than half of the 247,278 patients treated at the facility that year.

A similar pattern is discernible from 2014 statistics. In November of that year, the hospital admitted 13,538 men, far higher than the 9,229 female in-patients.

Overall, the number of female patients increased in July 2013 and October 2014.

## ISSUES

**Numbers.** An analysis of the records at Butabika shows number of patients has more generally increased every successive year since 2010

**Causes.** According to Dr Basangwa, alcohol and drug addiction are the major triggers of mental disorder in Uganda.

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## GRAPHIC ABOUT PATIENTS TREATED AT BUTABIKA HOSPITAL



73

Number of UPDF soldiers treated at Butabika between July 2014 and June 2015



1,524

Number of patients who escaped from Butabika with in the same period, slightly down from 1,614 the year before.



22,000

The average number of patients, more than half of them men, check at Butabika every November, December and January



31

Women on average check at Butabika with HIV-related psychosis compared to less than half for men



Alcohol and drug addiction are the major triggers of mental disorder in Uganda, Dr Basangwa said.

"In our culture, women tend to shy away from taking alcohol and using

drugs but we are [now] seeing an increase in the number of females using drugs," he said.

Mental illness among women, according to Butabika executive director Basangwa, is triggered mostly by pregnancy and childbirth, domestic violence, loss of a job or loved one.

The signs and symptoms of mental illness manifest in various forms and differ from one person to another, according to Mr Kizza Derrick Mbuga, the executive director of Mental Health Uganda, a patients' rights group.

As such, its early manifestations may be hard for the inexperienced to detect. Mr Mbuga lists unbearable anxiety, self-isolation or withdrawal attitudes, suicidal or violent tendencies, loss of appetite and change in sleeping patterns plus amnesia, among the symptoms.

During our investigations, our reporter spotted some of the adult patients walking around on Butabika Hospital compound dressed in their green short and round-necked tops. The children wore pink and one of them could be heard loudly singing local musician Ben Kakooza's (Ziza Bafana) track *Tuli maje* (we are the army).

The freedom of movement on the premises has been exploited by some of the recovering patients to vanish

scaled up the chain-link perimeter fence between 2013 and 2015 and escaped from the facility, which overlooks Lake Victoria.

A breakdown of the statistics indicates that the patients are of all age groups, socio-economic background and education.

"Mental illness doesn't discriminate and we have made an attempt to provide care and treatment to all," said Dr Basangwa.

The all-accommodating character of Butabika is in its infrastructure. The 550-bed facility has fourteen wards assigned separately for women, men, children and minor or severe cases while the Private Wing, which has 86 self-contained rooms, caters for the wealthy who can afford to pay for more privacy and better comfort.

Early this month, the Children's Ward had 23 patients aged five to 17. Fifteen were girls.

Ms Ahmad Rehema, a nursing officer, said the children mainly suffer from retarded cognitive disorders, epilepsy and mood disorders.

A 2006 Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) study estimated that 7 per cent of the households in the country had disabled members, with more than half having at least one person with a mental disorder.

According to the World

## Voice



"In our culture, women tend to shy away from taking alcohol and using drugs but we are [now] seeing an increase in the number of females using drugs."

DR DAVID BASANGWA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR BUTABIKA HOSPITAL

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