

World TB Day

TB continues to be top infectious killer

BY ISAAC SSEJJOMBWE
issejjombwe@ug.nationmedia.com

As the world marks Tuberculosis (TB) Day under the theme; 'Wanted: Leaders for a TB-free world', current statistics indicate that the disease continues to be one of the top infectious killers worldwide.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), TB claims more than 4,500 lives daily and the emergence of multidrug-resistant TB poses a major health threat and could risk gains made in the fight against TB.

Mr Ivan Mwebaza, a research scientist and pre-doctoral fellow at Makerere University, says TB is still wreaking havoc in the world whereby it is the leading cause of death from a single infectious agent and it ranks above HIV/Aids.

He says about 1.5 million TB deaths were recorded worldwide in 2016 and about 10.4 million people fell ill with TB.

The disease is deeply rooted in populations where human rights and dignity are limited. While anyone can contract TB, the disease thrives among people living in poverty, communities and groups that are mar-

ginalised, and other vulnerable populations. These include migrants, refugees, ethnic minorities, miners, those living in risk-prone settings, the elderly, marginalised women and children. Factors such as malnutrition, poor housing and sanitation, compounded by other risk factors such as tobacco and alcohol use and diabetes, affect vulnerability to TB and access

to care.

"These figures may appear trivial and negligible given the size of the world's population until you realise that around 82 per cent of these deaths occurred in Africa and South East Asia. The World Health Organisation reports that about 25,000 Ugandans succumbed to TB in 2016 and about 44,816 Ugandans were reported to have ac-



"It sounds contradictory that a curable disease described a century ago is still blooming and ranking highest among the infectious killers of our generation. Uganda has taken appreciable strides towards improving TB diagnostics where by about 105 Health facilities have machines that can detect tuberculosis in sputum within three hours,"

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quired the disease in the same year," Mr Mwebaza says.

He says suffering from TB is terrible enough even if someone recovers. The treatment takes six months with daily pill burden and likelihood of unpleasant side effects, not forgetting that it may be scaled up to at least nine months in case one is diagnosed with Multi-drug resistant TB, which doesn't respond to the first line medicines.

Recently, researchers at Makerere University revealed that stigma directed against TB patients in community is worse than that directed against people with any other illness.

"It sounds contradictory that a curable disease described a century ago is still blooming and ranking highest among the infectious killers of our generation. This paradox can be dealt with if we dissect into the scientific/biological, economical, societal and geographical ramifications surrounding it," Mr Mwebaza adds.

Theme focus

The theme focuses on building commitment to end TB, not only at the political level with Heads of State and health ministers, but at all levels from mayors, governors, parliamentarians and community leaders, to people affected with TB, civil society advocates, health workers, doctors or nurses, non-government organisations and other partners.

The facts surrounding TB status in Uganda rhymes well with the need for the communities to participate in the fight and they also promise their participation will be a formidable force towards ending the deleterious effects of the disease.

The 2014/15 TB prevalence survey found that poor health seeking behaviour of those with signs of presumptive TB was a major factor for under notification of cases to the health facilities.

The survey found that about 87,000 new cases occur every year but on average just a half of those are notified to the health care system.

"Un-notified cases are more likely not to receive adequate TB treatment and pose a risk to the community since they will be spreading the disease. Sixty per cent of these cases were due to self-treatment and ignoring symptoms," Mr Mwebaza says.