

Radiotherapy Treatment Relief

Assembling of new cancer machine starts this week

By Cecilia Okoth

The long-awaited radiotherapy cancer machine has arrived in the country. The assembling of the machine, which is expected to bring much relief to patients who have been braving tedious and expensive journeys to foreign countries for treatment, is set to start this week.

Constant campaigns on social media from friends and families of cancer patients intensified when the old machine broke down in April last year, rendering those in need of radiotherapy services helpless.

Dr Jackson Orem, the executive director of the Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI), yesterday confirmed that the long wait was over. He told *New Vision* that the machine was safely shipped into the country early last week.

"Although still in the custody of the Uganda Revenue Authority customs office, it will be officially handed over to the institute, not later than Wednesday this week."

"The engineers to assemble the machine are due in the country. They shall begin assembling it immediately, and thereafter, test it before it is commissioned," Orem explained.

Optimistic that radiotherapy services at UCI will resume by mid-

September, Orem said it will take the experts a month to assemble and test the machine.

Uganda's only radiotherapy machine broke down in April last year, depriving patients in need of the service. Following the crisis, The Aga Khan University Hospital (AKUH) in Nairobi, Kenya, offered to work with the Ugandan Government, to provide 400 "badly off" cancer patients with free treatment as a short term intervention.

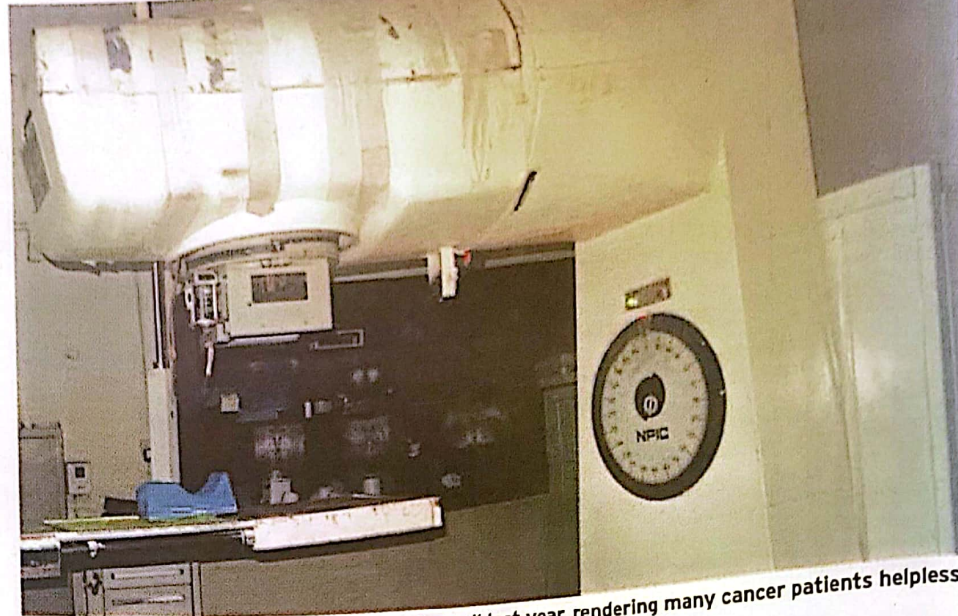
Radiotherapy, though not meant for all cancer patients, is one of the forms of treatment that uses high-energy radiation to shrink tumours and kill cancer cells. Other forms of treatment include surgery, chemotherapy and palliative care.

The World Health Organisation estimates that non-communicable diseases were responsible for 63% of the deaths and that 80% of them occurred in low and middle-income countries, including Uganda.

According to Dr Noleb Mugisha, the head of the comprehensive cancer care unit, UCI receives approximately 4,000 new cancer patients annually from all the districts in Uganda.

He said the institute also receives a total of 150 cases of cancer among children annually.

"Although the commonest cases



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ON THE GROUND

Dr Jackson Orem, the executive director of the Uganda Cancer Institute, yesterday confirmed that the long wait for the cancer machine was over. He said the machine was safely shipped into the country early last week and will be officially handed over to the institute, not later than Wednesday this week.

include cancer of the cervix, breast cancer among women and prostate cancer among men, the good news is that they can be treated, if identified early," Mugisha said.

He, however, said some cancers, such as cancer of the cervix and cancer of the liver, can be prevented by immunisation, regular exercise

and eating health foods, including fruits and vegetables, carrying out regular health checks and avoiding tobacco use and the harmful use of alcohol.

Reduced referrals abroad

At a press briefing to mark the institute's 50 years of existence early last week, Orem said once all new machines are in place, UCI will minimise referrals of patients abroad, saying it will have the capacity to treat most cancer cases.

Orem said in the late 1960s, in the 70s and the 80s, it was a policy that no cancer patients were referred abroad.

In addition to the new radiotherapy machine, Orem said more modern facilities, such as the linear accelerator machine with modern technology were procured, which he said will triple the institute's capacity to handle most cancer cases in the country.

children, for example, is something that can be treated here, if it is diagnosed early. Equally, cases like leukemia, lymphoma and bone marrow transplants will no longer be referred," he said, adding that a bone marrow centre is underway.

However, Orem said cancers that are mainly brain related will be among those that are exempted, saying they currently have little they can do about them.

"For example, whereas a patient suffering from leukemia who has been referred abroad for treatment (particularly India) would need \$200,000 (over sh700m, including transport and accommodation costs), the same can be treated for sh500m or sh400m at the cancer institute," he explained.

Before this intervention, Orem said the institute was making over 200