

EDITORIAL

Cholera outbreak: Boost community health teams

The Ministry of Health last week confirmed the outbreak of cholera in Makindye Division in Kampala. By last Friday, four people with signs of the disease had been admitted to Naguru hospital. According to State minister for Primary Health Care, Ms Sarah Opendi, one case has been confirmed and the rest are probable.

This development should not come as a surprise given the heavy rains that have wreaked havoc across the country in the past few weeks. It is common knowledge that poor sanitation, often worsened by flooding caused by heavy rainfall, is a leading cause of diseases such as cholera - primarily transmitted through contaminated water or food. Given how fast the disease spreads, people living in congested areas such as city slums where hygiene standards low poor are at high risk.

There is a general trend where heavy rains often come with cholera outbreaks. It is thus expected that routine sensitization, disease surveillance and increased health education are carried out, especially in high-risk areas to curtail outbreaks and prevent spread. The Health ministry should ensure the population is educated on basics like identifying the signs and symptoms of cholera such as pain in abdomen, severe diarrhea, vomiting, dehydration etc., so that they can seek medical attention immediately.

The issue:

Cholera outbreak

Our view:

...the Health ministry should have a functioning disease outbreak preparedness plan that focusses on sanitation and hygiene programmes as a preventive measure.

While the Ministry of Health has already dispatched a team to the affected area to work with village health teams to sensitise residents about basic hygiene practices such as drinking boiled water and washing hands with soap after visiting toilets, such health education should be a sustained initiative, not a response measure.

Disease prevention, which is an easier, less costly option than managing an outbreak, should be a deliberate effort that is implemented throughout the country. For instance, minister Opendi said the government has secured a cholera vaccine that is now being administered to children aged one year and above in Hoima and Kyegegwa districts. This follows a recent cholera outbreak in the refugee settlement camps of Kyangwali in Hoima District and Kyaka II in Kyegegwa District which left dozens of people, mostly Congolese refugees dead, and hundreds others treated in the camps.

The trend of cholera outbreaks being predictable, we think the Health ministry should have a functioning disease outbreak preparedness plan that focusses on sanitation and hygiene programmes as a preventive measure; as well as quick response and provision of medicines to control disease spread. Outreach programmes and regular training of community health teams are practical initiatives that will reinforce timely response.