

Students take on MPs in HIV/AIDS debate

By Henry Sekanjako

The parliamentary chambers yesterday turned into a contest arena as secondary school students drawn from 47 secondary schools across the country, battled with MPs on whether HIV/AIDS testing by citizens should be made mandatory in Uganda.

The debate, which lasted an hour, saw the students and MPs engage in a battle of the brains on the dangers and benefits associated with compulsory testing of HIV/AIDS by citizens.

Despite the MPs consenting to the proposal to have mandatory testing, the students warned them that the move would financially strain the country and deny Ugandans their right to privacy.

"We don't have enough resources to cater for the already existing number of people on HIV/AIDS treatment (ARVs). What would happen when more Ugandans test positive with the compulsory testing," Amos Muhumuza, a student of Nyakasura School in Kabarole asked.

Citing Philly Bongole Lutaaya, who was among the first Ugandans to declare his HIV/AIDS status in Uganda, the students implored the MPs to push for voluntary testing as opposed to the compulsory one.

"We have to look at the bigger picture before we make HIV/AIDS testing compulsory. For example, who is going to pay for the equipment

BETWEEN THE LINES

■ Amos Muhumuza, a student of Nyakasura School in Kabarole, noted: "We don't have enough resources to cater for the already existing number of people on HIV/AIDS treatment (ARVs). What would happen when more Ugandans test positive with the compulsory testing?"

to be used? Where are the health workers for the task? Mandatory testing is not only expensive, but it is also going to torture Ugandans psychologically," Fred Okoth, a student at St Peter's College, Tororo, said.

The report also indicated that persons living with HIV, who have achieved viral load suppression, live longer, healthier lives and are less likely to infect their partners or to transmit the virus to their unborn babies.

According to the report, the total population of people living with the virus dropped to 1.3 million in 2016, from over 1.6m five years ago.

It is this progress on HIV/AIDS treatment and management by Uganda that the MPs think, with compulsory testing, will improve to even much better results, for proper planning by the

government.

"When you go for malaria treatment in India, the first thing they do is to test you for HIV. It is compulsory. So, for our country to move forward, we have to test for HIV/AIDS and put people on medication for those who are found to be sick. You cannot develop a country with a sick population," Gerald Ibanda, the MP for Ntoroko County, said.

Theodore Ssekikubo, the Lwemiyaga County MP, added: "When a country knows the number of people infected by the virus, it will plan better for availability of ARVs and the only way to do this is getting people tested."

The MPs noted that because of ignorance, in the past, the country lost resourceful people, such as Philly Bongole Lutaaya, attributing HIV/AIDS virus to witchcraft.

"Fellow Ugandans, I want you to know that we are dealing with a matter of life and death. When HIV/AIDS first broke out, killing people like Lutaaya, we thought it was witchcraft because of ignorance. Remember a problem shared is a problem solved," Robert Kyagulanyi (Kyadondo East) said.

The debate, which was presided over by Gasta Kakaire, the executive director of the National Debate Council and was organised by the Parliament of Uganda, Ministry of Health, Uganda AIDS Commission, UNAIDS and TASO, among others.