

Uganda to roll out new tuberculosis drug

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Starting January, patients suffering from multi-drug resistant tuberculosis (TB) will take a shorter dose lasting nine months from the current 24 months as the Government moves to change the treatment regimen.

The new drug is expected to lead to high completion rates and reduce transmission, according to Dr Frank Mugabe, the head of the National TB and Leprosy Programme (NTLP).

Tuberculosis is a bacterial infection that affects the lungs and causes patients to cough profusely, have chest pains, fever and weight loss.

Multi-drug resistant TB occurs when the bacteria that causes TB becomes resistant to treatment with at least two of the most powerful first-line drugs (isoniazid and rifampin).

At least 350 people are living with multi-drug resistance TB in Uganda. Globally, there are half a million cases of resistance to TB drugs, according to WHO. It costs about sh12m to treat one multi-drug resistant patient, according to Mugabe.

The burden of TB

At least 90,000 new cases of TB are recorded in Uganda every year, compared to 60,000 new HIV cases annually.

Registering about 5,000 deaths a year, Uganda is one of the 22 high TB burden countries in the world. Co-infection is another concern.

Almost 50% of TB patients today are HIV-positive.

Resistance to antibiotics arises either due to wrong drugs, wrong dosage or a patient's failure to adhere to the prescribed drug or dosage.

Scientists worry that the slow progress in development of new antibiotics since the 1970s, when the last major antibiotic (rifampicin) was produced, could hurt efforts to find a potent cure for multi-drug resistant TB.

New trials

Researchers on Wednesday unveiled new findings showing that it is possible to shorten TB treatment from six months to three or four months.

Dr Daniel Atwine, one of the researchers unveiled the findings at the first Epicentre Scientific Day conference held at Serena International Conference centre in Kampala.

Epicentre is an association created in 1986 by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), an international humanitarian organisation, to provide epidemiological expertise.

In 2014, the national TB reference lab at Mulago received 'supranational' status, meaning it can now carry out rapid diagnosis of tuberculosis, including multi-resistant strands.

Health minister Dr Jane Ruth Aceng hailed the organisation for supporting the Government in times of haemorrhagic fever outbreaks in western Uganda by training health workers.