

Scientists warn govt on sleeping sickness

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KAMPALA. Scientists have asked African governments to commit more resources to eliminate residual cases of African trypanosomiasis, also known as sleeping sickness, to avoid escalation of infection and spread of the disease.

Speaking to this newspaper on the sidelines of an International course on African trypanosomiasis at Makerere University, Ms Veerle Lejon, a research director at the France-based Institut de recherche pour le développement, said the continent risks re-emergence of the disease if the remaining cases are not eliminated.

"The fewer the cases that have been reported, the less attention have been given to the disease. This risks re-occurrence of the disease on the continent," Ms Lejon said.

The three-week training is organised by the Association Against Trypanosomiasis in Africa (ATA) in collaboration with the World Health Organisation (WHO).

It is supported by the Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative (DNDi) and Makerere University's College of Veterinary Medicine, Animal Resources and Biosecurity.

According to information on WHO website, sleeping sickness is transmitted to humans by tsetse fly (*Glossina* genus) bites, which acquire their infection from human beings or from animals that harbour the parasites that cause the disease.

Tsetse fly transmits nagana in cattle and horse, posing a potential risk to Uganda's livestock.

Symptoms of the disease include fever, swollen lymph glands, aching muscles and joints, headaches and irritability. When left untreated, the disease attacks the central nervous system and can cause death.

Cases

In 2009, there were 9,878 new cases of the disease reported in Uganda, according to Health ministry data. This was also the first time in 50 years that less than 10,000 cases were reported.

And in 2012, this figure dropped further to 7,216 cases and now scientists estimate the figures to be below 300.

Prof John David Kabasa, the principal for College of Veterinary Medicine, Animal Resources and Bio-Security (COVAB) at Makerere University, said government was giving priority to diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, among others, and has neglected sleeping sickness. "If our scientists are supported, we can wipe out this disease in short time but it is not [being treated as] a priority disease," Prof Kabasa said.

Dr Enock Matovu, another official from COVAB, said the disease has tremendous effects on cattle reducing milk production by 26 per cent and causes high mortality of calves.

Sleeping sickness has been in Uganda for more than a century.