CONSEQUENCES OF UNWANTED PREGNANCY

Prevent maternal deaths

By Vision Reporter

Between four and five Ugandan women die every day from complications related to unsafe abortions, according to Dr Charles Kigguddu, a senior consultant gynaecologist at Mulago Hospital.

Speaking at a workshop at Metropole Hotel in Kampala recently, Kiggundu defined abortion as an end of a pregnancy (either spontaneous by induction) before a baby is able to lead an independent life.

He added that unsafe abortions fall under induced abortions and are defined as those performed by untrained people or in unhygienic environments or both. Such abortions cause complications, which can led to death. Complications include incomplete abortions that can lead to infections, rupturing of the uterus, sepsis and over-bleeding that can lead to shock.

A 2016 study by Makerere University School of Public Health and the Guttmacher Institute in the US, established that about 314,300 induced abortions were performed in Uganda in 2013. This translates into 14% of the 2.5 million pregnancies that are recorded in the country every year. This implies that 860 abortions are induced in Uganda every day.

In addition, according to the study, 52% of all pregnancies in Uganda were unintended and about a quarter of them ended in abortion. More so, more than half developed complications that required medical attention.

However, it was disclosed that only 20% of the health centres in Uganda can provide emergency obstetric services, where women with complications can get services. This means that many women who develop complications die. Abortion is one of the five leading causes of maternal deaths in Uganda, accounting for 26% of pregnancy-related deaths. In addition, the study established that post-abortion care costs Uganda up to $14m (about sh50b) annually.

Other reasons women give for seeking to terminate a pregnancy include:

- Wrong timing, especially among young people and those above 40 years
- Pregnancy coming from the wrong person (incest, adultery, rape)

Prevent unsafe abortions

Kiggundu notes that prevention of maternal deaths due to unsafe abortions should include

- Prevention of unwanted pregnancies. This can be done through sex and sexuality education, in addition to increased access to contraception services for those who are sexually active. Kiggundu noted that given that most abortions result from unintended pregnancies, there is need to improve access to family planning services.
- Psychosocial care (counselling) should be provided for women and young girls with unwanted pregnancies. They should be talked to and listened to by their parents and medical professionals.
- There is need for the provision of professional emergency services for women who have gone through unsafe abortions in order to treat complications and prevent death. Those who have gone through unsafe abortions should be supported with information and reproductive health services so as to prevent a recurrence.
- Couples should discuss contraceptive options and men are urged to get involved in issues of maternal health.

Legislate against unsafe abortions

In addition to an unmet need for family planning, experts have attributed cases of unsafe abortion to the law of the land that criminalises abortion.

The Penal Code of 1950 (the Supreme Law of Uganda) indicates criminal penalties for anyone who obtains an abortion or contributes to the procurement of one. The only exception is if the procedure is intended to save a woman's life.

However, the 2012 National Policy Guidelines and Service Standards for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, which is still under review, seeks to increase conditions for abortion to include cases of foetal anomaly, rape and incest, or if the woman is HIV-positive.

Prof. Ben Kiromba Twinomugisha, an expert in health law at Makerere University, noted that the laws and policies on abortion are unclear and wanting, which leads to them being interpreted inconsistently by law enforcers and the judicial system. This makes it difficult for women and the medical community to understand when abortion is permitted. As a result, even those women who would have been permitted by law to procure safe abortions end up undergoing unsafe ones.

Twinomugisha urges Parliament to draft a clear law that regulates abortion.



Unwanted pregnancies can lead to stress and, sometimes to maternal death as women turn to unsafe abortions

...family planning range from lack of access ... associated with the services and related aspects, ... women do not use family planning because ...