

Uganda has 40 eye specialists – experts

By Moses Mulondo

Uganda's eye specialists (ophthalmologists) have expressed concern over what they termed as continued negligence of eye care by the Government.

The doctors, under their umbrella organisation of Uganda Ophthalmology Society, yesterday appealed to the Executive and Parliament to increase funding to the eye health sector.

They also implored Parliament to pass a Bill, which will make organ transplant legal in Uganda because many people who go blind would have their eye sight saved through cornea transplant.

The ophthalmologists from both public and private hospitals made the remarks yesterday during their sensitisation and eye screening undertaking for the staff and Members of Parliament, which was inaugurated by Speaker Rebecca Kadaga.

The Uganda Ophthalmology Society president, Dr Grace Ssali Nsibirwa, said: "Eye healthcare is neglected by our government. That is why in the Ministry of Health, eye care was not given a department of its own, but put under the unit for disability, and is headed by someone who is not an ophthalmologist."

Nsibirwa revealed that from the reports arising out of the work they do, they have realised that the diabetic eye disease is on the rise, attributing it to lifestyle

changes, especially the unhealthy food they eat.

Nsibirwa stated that glaucoma, which is the leading cause of irreversible blindness, has also been on the rise, with a prevalence of 6.3% to 8.3% of the eye patients in the country.

The exercise at Parliament is one of the precursor events as Uganda prepares to host a regional conference of eye specialists from east, central and southern Africa to take place next week, on Thursday and Friday at Speke Resort Munyonyo, Kampala under the theme: *Teamwork in Eye Care*.

The conference chairperson, Dr Anne Ampaire, expressed fear that whereas the incidence of eye illnesses is on the rise and the population rising, the entire country has only 48 ophthalmologists, of which eight have retired.

She cited districts, like Kabale, Masaka, Mubende and Karamoja region as some of the areas without an eye doctor.

Kadaga expressed shock that the health ministry does not have a department for eye healthcare. She pointed out that other diseases, such as cancer and diabetes, have been neglected by the Government.

She proposed that the Government adopts a policy for routine medical checkups for all illnesses for people who go to public medical facilities for early detection of diseases, which become incurable, if detected in advanced stage.