

Parliament at the forefront of

Putting the strings. Through legislation, Parliament has been instrumental in establishing the Uganda Cancer Institute Act and improving treatment of cancer in the country.

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As the Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI) celebrates its Golden Jubilee, Parliament of Uganda has played a key role in formalising the institute's work and improving treatment of cancer in the country.

Through Parliament, UCI has been able to secure more funding in terms of budget allocations, policy formulation and better service delivery.

Parliament, for instance, enacted a Bill in 2016 that mothered the Uganda Cancer Institute Act, establishing UCI as an autonomous agency of government mandated to undertake and coordinate the prevention and treatment of cancer and related diseases, and to conduct research on cancer in Uganda.

To be specific, Parliament, through its Health committee and plenary sessions, adopted and recommended that due to sensitivity in the procurement and storage of the highly specialised medicine, UCI be mandated to procure the chemotherapeutic agents, highly specialised medicines as well as medical supplies and equipment used in the treatment of cancer.

This was done as a measure against duplication of roles or classes between the institute and the National Medical Stores, and to ensure timely access to highly specialised medicine.

It was also done to ensure that the institute establishes the appropriate departments for palliative care and rehabilitation services and also establish a robust, technical and multidisciplinary staff mix to take the institute forward.

Cancer Bill

There was also need for UCI to be empowered with sufficient resources to gainfully engage the community, cancer survivors and civil society organisations to support the cancer work.

Parliament noted that establishing UCI as an autonomous institution would eliminate irregularities in the procurement process, undertake the prevention and treatment of cancer in cancer related diseases. The institute would also ensure provision of palliative care and rehabilitation to cancer patients among others.

Several lawmakers were outspoken the need for a functional cancer institute. Dr Medard Bitekerezo, the Iruu Municipality MP in the 9th Parliament, is one such people who up this fight. Dr Bitekerezo was at the time chairing the Committee of Health where he passionately advocated for a better cancer institute. "There is an outcry in Mulago. We have drugs for cancer. When we ask about cancer, this is simply an ailment proliferation; it is not somebody drugs to stop that do not proliferation, the cancer will spread. In other words, the Uganda



Commitment. Speaker of Parliament Rebecca Kadaga (Front row, 3rd left) flags off the Rotary Cancer Run recently. Parliament of Uganda has, over the years, been at the forefront of the fight against spread of cancer in the country. COMRAH/UCI

Cancer Institute needs a mandate to procure drugs urgently for anybody who has been found with cancer, without these jargons of yours like the PPDA and the like. Diseases do not read books. If I am a doctor and you have come to me and I have found you with cancer, I must give you drugs and not speeches," Dr Bitekerezo said.

"I would like to leave this Parliament after I have worked on the Uganda Cancer Institute. I am now writing the reports...when we legislate on this law, we shall create some small avenues where drugs can be procured without necessarily passing through the hurdles of the National Medical Stores," Dr Bitekerezo added.

"There is a very high figure of cancer patients in Uganda and we can't just look on or simply let Rotary do this on its own. We must come together and stop cancer. We must dream of a time when nobody dies of cancer. It may sound unrealistic. Deep down my heart, I know this is possible."

REBECCA KADAGA, SPEAKER OF PARLIAMENT

Like Dr Bitekerezo, Mr Michael Mawanda (NRM, Igara County East, Bushenyi) who also lost his seat in the 10th Parliament, made formidable submissions.

"We have talked about very many diseases, but I would like to bring it to your attention that cancer is a silent killer. Last year, I sponsored two medical camps in my constituency to screen for cancer. In the first medical camp, we had 100 people; we just set

up a camp and started calling people. We screened more than 5,000 people. However, specifically, we called about 50 women just casually. Surprisingly, out of the 50 women that were screened, 25 of them - who were not even sick but were by-passers whom we just called to come and test - had cancer and they did not know," said Mr Mawanda.

In the same pursuit, Speaker of Parliament Rebecca Kadaga also called for an effective health system that will foster treatment of cancer in the country.

Speaking about the Uganda Cancer Institute Bill, 2015, the Speaker emphasised the need for peer education and community sensitisation.

"I am a campaigner against the spread of cancer. One day I made a proposal that in order to help the women, they should be routinely examined for cervical cancer; the men were not very happy with me. They said they did not want their wives to be touched all the time. However, in China, every woman must be examined once a year for cervical cancer; it is by law. Therefore, we should increase awareness and maybe one day we will reach that level," said Kadaga.

While presenting the Bill for the second reading, the then Minister of State for Health, Dr Chris Baryomunsi, said: "The intention of the government is to strengthen the Uganda Cancer Institute which has been in existence but as a small unit within Mulago Hospital. We would like to think Parliament because over time, you have been trying to strengthen

this cancer institute." Although Dr Bitekerezo and Mr Mawanda were not voted back to the 10th Parliament, the Uganda Cancer Institute Bill was passed into law on May 5, 2017.

Parliament has also been instrumental in approving budget increases for UCI. The UCI budget has kept rising from Shs2 billion in 2010 to Shs46 billion in 2016/2017 and Shs65 billion in 2017/2018.

Achievements

Parliament is proud that through its intervention, Uganda today boasts of a modern cancer institute match of international standards that will address the challenge of treating cancer and cancer-related diseases. There is significant reduction in referrals to other countries abroad as well as access to highly specialised cancer medication.

There is also increased local capacity to handle super specialised cancer conditions and an empowered institute that oversees the management of other public health centers across the country which are not yet super specialised but are handling cancer related services.

UCI has dispelled the myths that cancer can only be treated by surgery and radiotherapy. A ground breaking research in Mulago discovered that cancer could be treated with drugs. Established in 1967, UCI continues to pioneer research in Africa and provide affordable treatment to patients and susceptible victims. Today, UCI has made strategic steps

towards the realisation of the Bill, now an Act. It is steadily meeting the ideals of its autonomous status with the mandate to undertake and coordinate the management of cancer and cancer related diseases in Uganda.

There has also been a significant rise in the procurement and supply of the highly specialised drugs and medical transits thus improving service delivery compared to the past. The quality of drugs supplied is of common hope for the better.

Cancer is easier to treat if discovered early. This can be detected through routine voluntary screening, which requires robust information dissemination. After the Bill was adopted and enacted into law, it was clear that just like the rest of the public, all members were excited and eager to see the institute live to the intentions of the law.

In a confession during one of the

INTERVENTIONS

Parliament enacted a Bill in 2016 that mothered the Uganda Cancer Institute Act. The House has also been instrumental in approving budget increases for UCI. The UCI budget has kept rising from Shs2 billion in 2010 to Shs46 billion in 2016/2017 and Shs65 billion in 2017/2018. Parliament has continued to support cancer awareness campaigns, including the annual Rotary Cancer Run. During the fifth edition of cancer run in August last year, Parliament raised Shs20 million, while in the sixth edition in June 2017, Parliament made a pledge of Shs44 million.

fighting cancer in Uganda



Compassionate. Speaker Kadaga speaks to a cancer patient in Jinja Hospital during the launch of the cancer unit recently.

sessions of Parliament, Ms Lucy Akello (Amuria Woman MP) said UCI treated his brother and saved his life. "My brother was going to die of cancer but luckily, we discovered it early. He was treated and he is now a very normal young boy. He was hardly 27 years old (in 2016). So we could have

lost a very young boy. I thank Dr Orem (the executive director UCI) for what he is doing in that institute," she said. Dr Baryomunsi assured Parliament

about government's commitment towards an enabling environment in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer, saying the passing of the Bill into law was a key undertaking towards the much anticipated dream.

"I would like to give you the assurance that government and the Ministry of Health are committed to ensuring that the issue of cancer is addressed. Therefore, what you have done is a very big contribution in the fight against cancer because it is a challenge, which all of us must work together to address in the country," said Dr Baryomunsi.

Looking back at the "key undertakings" it is only a ray of hope as the UCI continues to rise into a centre of excellence.

Fundraising

Parliament has continued to support cancer awareness campaigns, including the annual Rotary Cancer Run where individual members and sections of the public have raised funds for cancer treatment.

The Speaker has on several occasions rallied MPs and the public to take a front seat in the fight against cancer in Uganda.

During the fifth edition of cancer run in August last year, Parliament raised Shs20 million, while in the sixth edition in June 2017, Parliament made a pledge of Shs44 million. Whereas the money will not go di-

rectly to the UCI in Mulago, its contribution to the general fight against cancer in the country cannot be over emphasised.

Fifty (50) years of UCI cannot go without challenges, which are still prevalent, faced by the institute.

Challenges

There are evidently not enough resources to run the institute and there has been delay in the decentralisation of cancer services. However, with a facility already operating in Mbarara, there is hope that the dream to decentralise cancer treatment will be achieved.

Parliament also remains concerned with the challenges faced by limited oncologists in the country and urges government to undertake deliberate efforts through scholarships and direct sponsorship to medical doctors to qualify in the highly specialised cancer field.

The absence of a full-fledged Board also remains a key challenge with significant impact in the day-to-day operations of the Institute, and measures need to be taken to ensure that this gap is covered.

Since 2016, Parliament remains concerned with the absence of a national policy on cancer and recommends that the minister of Health fast-track the Cancer Prevention and Treatment Policy.

Although there have been repeated calls for a National Cancer Policy, government is yet to make this a reality.

'Cancer fight a priority of Parliament'



strengthen the cancer institute. This is evident in the efforts it continues to get involved in to help in research and building of the Institute in all aspects.

Parliament supported the Institute by increasing its budget from about Shs2 billion in 2011 to Shs46 billion in the Financial Year 2016/2017. In the current financial year, this budget has been increased to more than Shs52 billion.

In 2013, Parliament appropriated money for the purchase of a new linear accelerator machine, which is sophisticated for treating advanced cancer. The institute will also ensure provision of palliative care and rehabilitation to cancer patients, among others.

Speaking at the 10th Stop Cervical, Breast and Prostate Cancer in Africa Conference at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in July 2016, Speaker of Parliament Rebecca Kadaga called upon African governments to subsidise cancer drugs so as to ease access and affordability by those on treatment.

Apart from budget increases, Parliament in 2016 passed the Uganda Cancer Institute Bill, 2015 into law. The object of the law was to establish the Uganda Cancer Institute as an autonomous agency of government mandated to undertake and coordinate the prevention and treatment of cancer and cancer related diseases and to conduct research in cancer.

The law also establishes a modern cancer institute with international standards that will address the challenge of treating cancer and cancer related diseases. This will in the end reduce referrals of cancer patients abroad, ensuring access to highly specialised cancer medication, as well as increased local capacity to handle super specialised cancer conditions.

It will also empower the institute to oversee the management of cancer and cancer related diseases in the other public health centres across the country. The Uganda Cancer Institute as an autonomous institution will help weed out the irregularities in the procurement process, and undertake the prevention and treatment of cancer and cancer related diseases. The institute will also ensure provision of palliative care and rehabilitation to cancer patients, among others.

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leaders at all levels to sensitise the masses on the need for cancer screening at early stages to help reduce preventable deaths.

Parliament continues to hold the Annual Parliament Health Week every December and at this event, there is screening for breast and prostate cancers. This is carried out as part of the corporate social responsibility and this has registered positive results.

The Speaker, staff and Members of Parliament have over the past three years also taken part in the Rotary Cancer Run. As much as this effort does not directly benefit the Uganda Cancer Institute, it is an effort in the fight against cancer.

Recently, while launching the 2017 Rotary Cancer Run, the Speaker announced that each MP would contribute Shs1 million totalling Shs49 million towards the building of a bunker at Nsambya Hospital.

This bunker and machine, when completed and installed, will go a long way in treating cancer patients.

Parliament, therefore, values the efforts of the Uganda Cancer Institute in fighting cancer and pledges to continue supporting these efforts. Parliament also salutes the efforts of all the staff at the Institute led by its director general.

As the legislative arm of government, we congratulate the Uganda Cancer Institute on the 50 years of great accomplishments in the field of cancer research and treatment.

Mr Chris Obore is Parliament director of communications and public affairs