



A nurse officer at Serere Health Centre IV in Serere district vaccinating people against Hepatitis B. Right, residents waiting to be screened for Hepatitis B. Photos by Agnes Kyotalengerire

Steps to eliminate Hepatitis B on

By Agnes Kyotalengerire

The Ministry of Health is yet to release results of the most recent sero-survey on the prevalence of Hepatitis B in the country, according to Dr. Jackson Amone, the commissioner of curative services.

At the moment, Amone says, there is no reliable data to show the actual prevalence of Hepatitis B in the country, which poses a big problem. "We have been relying on data from a 2005 survey report and other studies, and even on records from antenatal clinics, to estimate the burden of the disease in the country. The survey targeted data on HIV/AIDS, and, as a by-the-way, also collected data on Hepatitis B," Amone says.

He made the comments ahead of World Hepatitis Day, which is annually marked on July 28. The theme this year is, *Eliminate Hepatitis* and celebrations will be held at Makerere University in Kampala.

Amone says the sero-survey, which kicked off in September last year, was completed early this year. He says the results of the sero-survey will soon be released.

He expresses optimism that the ministry will be in position to identify areas with high prevalence, so that the screening, vaccination and treatment services are scaled up or extended to such areas.

Challenges

Dr. John Obonyo, a clinical officer in the department of curative services, describes Hepatitis B as endemic, meaning that it is a condition that has been present in the population with an estimated national prevalence of about 10%, basing on the 2005 survey report.

Obonyo says apart from the high prevalence of Hepatitis B, their biggest challenge is that the disease does not present with signs and symptoms.

"Patients who are positive will not know that they have Hepatitis B virus. By the time a person gets to know that they have it, they are presented with complications, such as liver diseases and are in the chronic stage," he says.

Meanwhile, Amone adds that the disease has never attracted funding, and, therefore, Hepatitis B programmes have no budget. He even says there are no organisations or partners funding Hepatitis B programmes.

"Even the World Health Organisation has no funding and is instead tagging Hepatitis B, together with HIV/AIDS, because it is transmitted in the same way and wants to ride on the system of HIV/AIDS because it is already established," Amone explains.

Knowledge gap

Amone also says there is a big knowledge gap on the mode of transmission. "People lack information on how the disease is transmitted and

Facts about Hepatitis

- There are five types of Hepatitis. These include A, B, C, D and E.
- According to the 2005 survey report, about 3.4 million Ugandans have Hepatitis B infection.
- Hepatitis B infection is caused by hepatitis B virus, which infects the liver, causing inflammation.
- Once infected, there is an approximately one in 10 chances that the body will not get rid of the virus.
- The chronic form gradually progresses into complications, such as scarring of the liver, liver cancer and chronic liver failure.
- The virus is spread through coming into contact with blood and body fluids, mother-to-child, sharing of sharp instruments, sexual contact with an infected person and blood transfusion.
- Hepatitis B is a silent infection that does not present any symptoms.
- Symptoms, such as fever, yellowing of the eyes, headache, body pain, nausea, abdominal pain and vomiting in the acute phase of infection will manifest
- Patients are treated using anti-retro-viral drugs, but vaccination is the best against the disease.

because of this, many people who are positive have been deported. Additionally, there is lack of knowledge on how to test; screen for Hepatitis B and also many test kits, which bring about inconsistent results, thus painting a wrong picture on the prevalence of the disease," he says.

Besides, he adds, there are so many test kits on the open market used to test for Hepatitis B.

"People are using it as a loophole to make money because we do not have the money to purchase the standard test kits," he says.

He further adds that the ministry is yet to supply all the necessary tools, such

as vaccination cards and registers across the country.

Harriet Achiro, a medical officer in charge of the Hepatitis B Clinic at Adjumani Hospital, concurs that they do not have registers for capturing information on patients, and, therefore, are forced to improvise with counter books for the purpose.

Amone says screening and vaccination against Hepatitis B is ongoing and is being done in phases.

"In September 2015, we started the programme in the northern and eastern region of Uganda, in 14 districts, being the regions with highest disease burden.

In November last year, we added other 25 districts, bringing the total to 39, and we have a plan to scale it up, once we have current data on the prevalence of Hepatitis B of the country," Amone explained.

Hepatitis B death

About a month ago, Morris Okwir, a resident of Serere town, lost his 29-year-old brother to Hepatitis B. Vincent Ebiau died within two months of having been diagnosed with the disease. He started by complaining of stomach pain and swellings in his limbs, before his eyes turned yellow.

"When we took him to hospital, he was screened and found to have Hepatitis B. Upon doing further tests, the doctors confirmed that his liver was severely destroyed. He was put on palliative care and treatment, but later died," Okwir says.

According to Okwir, he knows of other people, within the same locality, who have succumbed to Hepatitis B.

When the *New Vision* visited Serere Health Centre IV in Serere district recently, there was a crowd near the laboratory, of people waiting to be screened for Hepatitis B. The situation was not any different at the outpatients' clinic; adolescents, women and men all queued up, waiting to be vaccinated.

Sharon Imou, a resident of Kidetop parish in Serere, says more than three people in her neighbourhood had died of the disease, which forced her to take a test.

"I think it is better to prevent the disease because many people in the district are infected," Imou says.

Vincent Oter, the health information assistant at the health facility, says when they refer Hepatitis B-positive patients to Soroti Hospital for further management, the patients return without treatment.

Oter says two health workers in Serere district were trained in Hepatitis B management before the launch of the programme in the district, but that they cannot treat patients because of lack of drugs.

Officials respond

Despite the meagre resources, he said the Government had approved a budget, and, the money for the procurement of drugs, was sent to the National Medical Stores, to procure drugs from CIPLA, where the drugs are currently being manufactured.

Daniel Kimosho, the NMS spokesperson, told the *New Vision* they have enough drugs for Hepatitis B.

"Health facilities are not ordering for the supply of drugs because we only supply the drugs on order," Kimosho said.

Dr. Patrick Musinguzi, the head of the Hepatitis B screening clinic at Mulago-Kiruddu, says there are very few people who require treatment or those that qualify to start taking drugs. Musinguzi estimates that out of the 1,000 patients he has seen since May this year, only 10 patients are on treatment.