

Mental health advocates fault Police on handling of patients

By Vivian Agaba

Mental health advocates yesterday complained to MPs on the health committee of Parliament about the way Police manhandles people suspected to be suffering from mental illness.

Joseph Atukunda, who suffers from bipolar disorder, one of the mental health conditions characterised by anxiety, depression and irritability, narrated a personal encounter with the Police.

He said one time, he was arrested and put in Police cells with other criminals who also beat him up.

"We do not like the way Police manhandles people who are suspected to be mentally ill. They grab you roughly, push you under the seats in their vans, and sometimes step on your head as if you are a criminal," Atukunda said.

"The Police must stop the inhumane way of handling people suspected to be mentally ill. They should also be taken to the hospital, not Police cells," Atukunda, who is also the founder of Heart Sounds Uganda, a mental health service user-led community-based organisation at



Opendi appearing before the health committee in December

Butabika Hospital, added.

The advocates were meeting MPs to give their submissions and recommendations as an input to the Mental Health Bill 2014. The Mental Health Bill 2014 seeks to provide for care and treatment for persons with mental illness at primary health centres.

It also internationalises the National

Health Policy which identifies mental health services as an essential part of healthcare and advocates mental health services at all levels to be integrated into general healthcare.

The Bill, currently before the committee, which is chaired by Dr Micheal Bukenya, also seeks to provide for the admission, treatment and discharge of persons with mental



Dr Stella Nyanzi

illnesses from health and mental units.

While appearing before the committee recently, Sarah Opendi, the state minister for health, said the Bill would ensure that persons with mental illness are enabled to seek treatment voluntarily, ensure their safety and protection of their rights as well as the safety of the people who come into contact with persons with mental illness and also establish the Mental Health Advisory Board.

In her submission, the outspoken feminist and Makerere University researcher, Dr Stella Nyanzi, also suggested that the provision allowing the Police to arrest anyone suspected

of being mentally ill without a warrant of arrest should be stopped.

Nyanzi said the Bill was long overdue, noting that there are many mental health-related challenges in the country that need to be addressed in the law.

Betty Awol Ochan, the Gulu Woman MP, said mental health is a serious health concern that has been given little attention, especially when it comes to funding and something must be done.

The deputy chairperson of the committee, who is also the Kiryandongo Woman MP, Hellen Kahunde, said any Ugandan that would like to add their voice to the amendment of the Bill is welcome, adding that more voices from the public will help the legislators come up with a better law.

The Bill was last brought to the floor of Parliament in 2004 and later on shelved.

The MP Ntwetwe County, Kyankwanzi district, Joel Ssebikaali, attributed the delay in discussing the Bill to limited funding and lack of interest by the previous legislators, adding that by the end of the year, the Bill may be passed into law.