

No end in sight, patients desperate

By Vision Reporters

Patients, especially those with major medical complications in many public hospitals and health centres across the country, may have to wait a few more days before they are attended to by doctors.

By press time last evening, there was still a standoff between the Government and the striking medical doctors, with each side stuck to its guns.

The Government showed no readiness to hold negotiations with the striking doctors, saying the Uganda Medical Association (UMA) that masterminded the strike has no mandate to negotiate over pay. Instead, the Government yesterday told the doctors to resume work immediately.

On their part the leaders of the striking doctors vowed not to return to the wards until the Government addresses their pay demands.

"We are going to continue with the strike until the Government responds. If we meet the President on November 17 and there is nothing that comes out of the meeting, we shall apply other means, but we are not going to work," said Dr Ekwaro Obuku, the UMA president.

Obuku added that the National Organisation of Trade Unions, which the Government wants them to go through to resolve the matter, is run by selfish people who do not represent the interests of doctors.

He said only UMA's general assembly can call off the strike that entered its third day yesterday.

The medics want the Government to increase salaries and duty allowances of health professionals, review the supply chain and management of medicines, vaccines and medical supplies, as well as disband the State House Medicine and Health Service Delivery Monitoring Unit.

At the Media Centre yesterday, a tough-talking Dr Jane Aceng, the health minister, said they are not going to discuss salary issues with UMA because some of its members are not government employees.

"Some doctors under UMA have taken industrial action, but as the Government we do not use associations to negotiate for salaries. We negotiate with formal unions, which most of the doctors subscribe too. We shall get back to the doctors by end of November," Aceng said.

Aceng praised the health workers who shunned the strike, describing them as patriotic. She called upon other doctors to resume work immediately as their concerns are being addressed.

Aceng also clarified that intern doctors are trainee doctors who are not under formal employment and,



Rev. Joshua Ejotu at Kaberemalo Health Centre IV having finished a day without being attended to

The minister said the Government will maintain interns' allowances at the same rate as last year and pay senior house officers after completing the verification exercise.

therefore, are paid an allowance and not a salary. The senior house officers, she said, are post graduate students in training, although some may be in formal employment by the Government under study leave.

She said the Government will maintain interns' allowances at the same rate as last year, without reduction and pay senior house officers after completing the verification exercise. She gave assurances that the public service pay policy, which is intended to eliminate pay disparities and ensure pay enhancement, is in its final stages.

Health workers split

As UMA insists on the strike, the Uganda Medical Workers' Union (UMWU) and the Uganda Nurses and Midwives Union (UNMU) yesterday asserted that the strike is illegal. The two unions argued that UMA did not seek their consent to stage the strike.

In a statement read by UMWU general secretary Aggrey Sanya, the unions argued that the strike was not only procedurally wrong but it also undermined the negotiations between them and government.

Speaking at an impromptu press conference held at Mulago Nurses Union offices, Sanya urged medical workers to resume work effective today

to allow negotiations.

"The Government has agreed with the two unions to fast-track negotiations to ensure the enhancement of salaries for all the health workers," he said. It remains to be seen whether the stand taken by the unions will extinguish the strike.

Patients flee hospitals

As the strike entered the third day yesterday, desperate patients at the affected public hospitals sought to find alternatives.

At Fort Portal Hospital, many patients were opting to go either back to their homes or to private health centres.

Cloviss Balinda, a resident of Bukuku who was referred to the hospital from Karangura Health Centre III, said he had not been attended to since Monday.

"I was admitted on Monday after sustaining injuries when I fell off a boda boda, but up to now nobody has attended to me," Balinda said.

Kampala

At Mulago Hospital, very few patients turned up for services. The children's outpatient department was empty and mothers were seen leaving the hospital because no one was attending to them.

The casualty ward, X-ray unit and the laboratories were handling only emergency cases. At the neurosurgery

ward, a few doctors were seen treating patients. The ward mainly admits patients with head injuries, especially accident victims. Intern doctors were seen on the casualty ward attending to accident victims.

A patient suffering from cervical cancer, speaking on condition of anonymity, said she received treatment yesterday.

"At least today I have received treatment, and other patients are also waiting to be treated," she said.

At Kiruddu Hospital, there were very few patients and there was no doctor attending to them, except at the burns unit and the ward for asthma patients where some nurses and doctors were on duty.

Manuela, a mother of a five-year-old girl, said: "My daughter was burnt by water. I brought her here in the morning and she is being attended to."

Angella Namatta complained that she had come for malaria treatment, however, she was not attended to. She was instead told to seek treatment at a private health facility.

"I am stuck because I have no money to buy medicine," Namatta said.

Facilities overwhelmed

The KCCA director of health and environment, Dr David Seruka, revealed that the number of patients has shot up at the KCCA facilities.

Some of these facilities include Kisenyi, Kawaala, Kisugu, Kitebi, Kiswa and Komamboga.

"We have been receiving high numbers of patients but for the last two days since the sit down strike was announced, the numbers are overwhelming," he said.

The officials at Kisugu Makindye division said the facility has been receiving between 150 and 200 patients

a day, but the number has now gone up to about 250.

At Kisenyi Health Centre in Central division, they have been handling about 500 outpatients daily but the numbers have doubled.

Kagadi district

Kagadi Hospital out-patients department has been closed since Monday and patients were advised to go to private clinics and hospitals.

Enid Kyalikunda, a patient in a female ward, said: "I was admitted on Monday after delivering, I was told by nurses to buy drugs from private clinics. It is expensive, but I have nothing to do."

Jacqueline Kyomuhendo, an expectant mother said: "I came here over the weekend. Although some midwives are checking on us, there is not much attention given to us."

A midwife at the hospital said the strike has been on for long.

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DOCTOR'S DEMANDS

"We started the strike last year. There are many issues, apart from salary increment, poor working conditions, staff quarters don't have functional toilets, payment of electricity bills is done on private basis. The hospital and staff quarters are bushy in addition to so many issues," she said. She said they were attending to only emergencies.

Specioza Nabukera, the principal nursing officer Kagadi, declined to comment on the strike but said services are going on normally.

Dr Isaac Kakibogo, the Kagadi Hospital medical superintendent, said it is only the out-patients department that is not working.

New Vision survey showed that the situation was any better in many other public hospitals and health centres across the country. For how long will this situation continue? No one can tell.

Compiled by Carol Kasujja, Vivian Agaba, Juliet Waiswa, Violet Nabatanzi, Andrew Musunguzi, Andrew Ssenyonga and Wilson Asimwe

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