

# Govt moves to tackle wrong diagnosis in health facilities

**Issue.** According to health officials, many patients in the country have been victims of wrong diagnosis

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**KAMPALA.** Irene Nabifuge, 18, had been complaining of continuous joint pains along with severe fever, when she walked into one of the biggest hospitals in the country and was wrongly diagnosed with Sickle cells.

When she started on medication, there was no change and side effects were quick to show.

After one year, she was referred to Mulago National Referral Hospital and the doctors there double-checked and assured her that she was a sickle cell carrier and continued her on sickle cell drugs for seven years but her condition turned from bad to worse.

"My fingers started deforming. When I went back to the doctor [at Mulago hospital] they realised that it was arthritis and not Sickle cells," Ms Nabifuge told *NTV* in an interview in 2014.

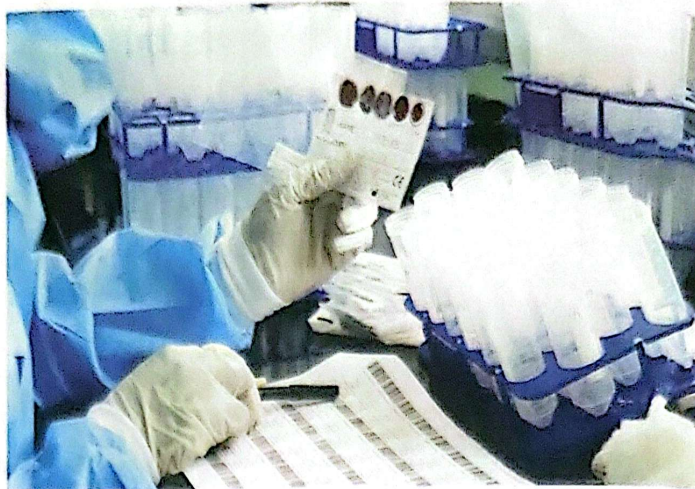
Arthritis is a common condition that causes pain and inflammation in a joint while sickle cell disease is a group of disorders that affects hemoglobin, the molecule in red blood cells that delivers oxygen to cells throughout the body.

Ms Nabifuge's story is shared by many Ugandans but who are suffering silently because of wrong diagnosis in the various health facilities: from public and private hospitals in the country to lower health units in remote areas.

Although there are currently no official statistics on medical misdiagnosis in Uganda, Dr Ekwaro Obuku, the general secretary of Uganda Medical Association, admits that "it is a big challenge which comes as a result of the poor quality of students that are churned out from [medical] schools."

As such, in a move to enhance diagnosis skills and deal with wrong diagnoses, government in partnership with other development partners have initiated a continuous refresher training programme for laboratory medical professionals across the country. This initiative reduces patient safety risks, particularly in public health facilities.

Although the programme is starting with a focus on Hepatitis B, a viral infection that attacks the liver, it will later be extended to train medical professionals in better diagnosis skills for other ailments. About 3.5 million people are living with viral Hepatitis B in Uganda. Unfortunately, most sufferers are



**Tests.** A lab technician analyses blood samples. In a move to deal with wrong diagnoses, government and development partners have initiated a continuous refresher training for laboratory medical professionals across the country. PHOTO BY RACHEL MBELE

unaware they have the disease and as a result of wrong diagnosis, some have been declared Hepatitis B free yet they are carrying the disease.

The new initiative under the continuous Profession Development (CPD), will among other things, benefit the scientists who discover the presence or absence of a disease and provide data that will help physicians determine the best treatment for the patient, in both private and public sectors for a period of two months starting with Kampala, Mbale and Arua districts.

A medical or clinical laboratory is where tests are usually done on clinical specimens in order to obtain information about the health of a patient as pertaining to the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of disease.

However, distribution of clinical laboratories in health institutions varies from one place to another.

Health minister Jane Ruth Aceng last year announced plans to rehabilitate medical laboratories in 100 public healthcare facilities countrywide.

Dr Allan Muluuta the assistant commissioner of National Disease Control at ministry of Health, explained that CPD will help to equip the professionals with new skills to manage the new innovations and machines for diagnosis.

"On this note, I ask the Allied Health Professional Council (AHPC) to start enforcing the AHPC Act not just for those already practicing but those coming [in the profession]," Dr Muluuta said at the launch of the programme on Wednesday at the Central Public Health Laboratories/ Uganda National Health Laboratory Services (UNHLS) in Luzira, Kampala.

The AHPC Act stipulates that before the renewal of the annual practicing licence for all allied professionals, they are supposed to have proof of continuous professional development. Allied health graduates will also be subjected to compulsory tests before they are authorised to practice.

## THE AREAS OF CONCERN

**Training.** Although the programme is starting with a focus on Hepatitis B, a viral infection that attacks the liver, it will later be extended to train medical professionals in better diagnosis skills for other ailments.

**Motive.** Ms Brenda Mushabe, the president of UMLTA, noted that their main role will be engaging the professionals in the continuous academic profession development to ensure that their skills do not become outdated.

**Numbers.** Under the programme, each district will be expected to forward 20 laboratory technicians for training.

Previously, Dr Muluuta, said the provision under the law has not been implemented because there were no structures.

"I encourage those in the private sector to participate in the programme so as to address the problem of false results and especially those of HIV/Aids," Dr Muluuta added.

Implemented by the Uganda Medical Laboratory Technology Association (UMLTA), the CPD programme, is partly funded by the Ministry of Health, among other partners.

Ms Brenda Mushabe, the president of UMLTA, noted

that their main role will be engaging the professionals in the continuous academic profession development to ensure that their skills do not become outdated.

They also target to reach out to 2,500 medical laboratory technicians in 112 districts.

"We are focusing on Hepatitis B because of its major prevalence in Uganda at 10 per cent [higher than that of HIV/Aids] and since the technicians are at high risks," Ms Mushabe said.

Under the programme, each district, she said will be expected to forward 20 laboratory technicians for training.

With the continuous training in place, Mr Patrick Mpiima Kibirango, the registrar of the Allied Health Professional Council, observed that the initiative is a major step in the right direction as a quality improvement measure so that the service providers are not obsolete.

"With effect from October 1, any one applying for practicing licences will undergo competence assessment," Mr Kibirango stated.

Mr Patrick Ogwo, the director of quality Assurance at UNHCL/CHPL, said the training will boost their "vision for a quality accessible services and will also help the Ministry of Health to achieve its vision of a health and productive population."

Patients' rights organisations have welcomed the move but warned that government should complement it with sufficient and modern equipment as well as extend it to other cadres such as dentists.

Mr Moses Talibita, a legal officer at Uganda National Health Consumers' Organisation, told *Daily Monitor* "We want that to cut across all specialised care."