

Worst blood shortage hits Uganda

By Martin Kitubi

Life is uncertain for many Ugandans who are set to undergo surgery, to deliver and accident victims at emergency wings of both private and public hospitals. The uncertainty follows a blood stock out at the National Blood Bank, Nakasero, in Kampala.

When *New Vision* visited the blood bank yesterday, several individuals from different hospitals had lined up with storage boxes, seeking blood.

Only 400 units of blood were available at the blood bank laboratory and were yet to be subjected to testing and processing before use.

These units were collected since Monday during the ongoing National Social Security Fund (NSSF) countrywide blood donation drive.

Each blood unit that was tested and passed for use was immediately issued to the waiting hospital representatives outside the laboratory.

"The country is in a huge crisis," Dr Dorothy Kyeyune Byabazaire, the Uganda Blood Transfusion Services (UBTS) executive director, said.

She added that the situation might worsen in the next few weeks if Ugandans do not join the cause to donate blood.

"Blood, unlike water, is not manufactured and it cannot be replaced. We call upon all Ugandans in good health to come and rescue the very many lives on life support machines," Kyeyune said.

Grace Otekat, the head of laboratory at UBTS, noted that there is need for urgent, collective effort by Ugandans to donate blood.

"This is the worst crisis ever experienced," she explained, noting that even the five other regional blood banks — Arua, Mbale, Gulu, Masaka and Mbarara — are experiencing the same shortage.

Surgery on hold

The situation has been felt at several hospitals in Kampala, including the China-Uganda Friendship Hospital (Naguru).

As of yesterday, the hospital lacked blood group O, which is a universal donor group, according to Dr John Wanyama, the head of obstetrics and gynaecology.

Blood is vital, mostly used in surgeries, deliveries for pregnant mothers and victims of accidents.

The hospital needed 10 units of blood group O, to subject ailing patients, children and expectant mothers to blood transfusion.

However, this was not possible as the only available



A blood transmission technician, Damalie Igune, working on some blood units at the Nakasero bank in Kampala yesterday. Photo by Lawrence Mulondo

unit of blood groups — B, AB — which are the least consumed, did not match the blood types of patients.

"We can't conduct operations without blood," Wanyama added.

Dr Steven Allele, the officer in charge of the Naguru hospital laboratory, noted that they had requested for blood from UBTS, "but hospital cars have returned home empty, despite the growing demands for blood at the hospital".

The crisis has also hit the

decried the unwillingness of several communities in the country to donate blood.

She also said inadequate funding by the finance ministry has negatively affected blood collection operations. In the current financial year, sh17b of the sh39b requested was allocated to UBTS for blood collection and testing exercises, salaries and development, among others, leaving a deficit of sh21b.

The above, coupled with the pullout of the Centres for Disease Control (CDC), who were financing UBTS in blood collection, has led to a fall in collection of blood from 247,711 units to 239,260 units in 2015/2016 and 2016/2017, respectively.

"CDC supported UBTS with about \$2m (sh7b) through the blood safety programme, which ended in March 2016. We have not had any alternatives and UBTS has received the same budget allocation in the last five years and yet, the shilling is fluctuating against the dollar," Kyeyune explained.

"We need about 300,000 units annually to sustain operations and emergencies."

Kyeyune

New Vision has learnt that UBTS, through the health ministry, has requested for a sh12b supplementary budget intended to increase blood collection, and procurement of test kits, blood bags through National Medical Stores.

However, Wanyama said that the challenge addressed if referral centres are allowed to conduct separate testing, adding that several relatives of the patients were willing to donate blood to save life.

Ministry of Health Dr Diana Atwine, the health ministry permanent secretary, told *New Vision* that the ministry is trying all means to address the shortage.

"We are having engagements to see that blood banks in the county have blood to donate," she said.

Shortage elsewhere

Several health centres in the western region have run out of blood, leaving the lives of patients who need blood in danger.

Juliet Businge, whose child is admitted at Kibiito Health Centre IV, Bunyangabu district, said she has been waiting for blood for the past three weeks.

"Health workers are informing me that there is no blood. Several other patients are also stranded at the health centre," Businge said.

At Rwesande Health Centre IV in Kasese district, several patients requiring blood are being referred to other health centres due to the blood shortage.

Julius Mwesige who was recently involved in an accident and admitted to Kyenjojo Hospital, said he has been waiting for blood for the last three days.

Dr James Ngobi, the director Fort Portal Blood Bank, disclosed that they are experiencing blood shortage following the high demand.

Additional reporting by Wilson Asimwe

DEATH ANNOUNCEMENT

