

Shs2b for cancer drugs unused as patients die

Issue. Dr Orem accuses NMS of not honouring Uganda Cancer Institute's monthly procurement orders which has condemned cancer patients to untold suffering.

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KAMPALA. Cancer patients continue to die for lack of life-saving drugs as Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI) at Mulago Hospital fails to spend Shs2 billion which remained lying idle on its drug budget at the National Medical Stores (NMS).

This stunning revelation is contained in the end-of-financial-year budget statement dated July 1 from NMS general manager Moses Kamabare.

The statement was addressed to UCI director Dr Jackson Orem, indicating a staggering Shs2.1 billion meant to procure anti-cancer drugs was not spent in the 2016/2017 financial year which ended in June.

"We look forward to continue working with you towards improved service delivery during the FY 2017/18," Mr Kamabare's letter on UCI budget performance reads in part.

This happens as cancer patients continue to dig deep into their pockets to buy medicines from private pharmacies.

Drug stockout

Last month, a source at the Cancer Institute told *Daily Monitor* that they had run out of regents and specialised drugs to treat various cancers.

However, in an interview yesterday, Dr Orem blamed failure to use the idle Shs2.1b for cancer drugs on NMS.

He accused NMS of not honouring UCI's monthly procurement orders which has condemned cancer patients to untold suffering.

Dr Orem claimed this would not happen if it were UCI procuring the specialised drugs.

Currently it's NMS which procures



Affected. Patients await radiotherapy treatment at the Uganda Cancer Institute in Mulago Hospital recently. The cancer institute has failed to utilise Shs2 billion which remained lying idle on its drug budget at the National Medical Stores. PHOTO BY RACHEL MABALA

the drugs and UCI only submits requisitions for the medicines it needs to use. There has been a long standing friction between NMS and UCI with the latter seeking autonomy to undertake its own procurement of cancer drugs and blaming the former for drug shortages at the country's only cancer centre.

The friction remains unresolved despite a new legislation empowering the Uganda Cancer Institute to conduct its own drug procurement.

"Our relationship should be stipulated by the Act (Uganda Cancer Institute Act) which states that we should be in charge of the highly specialised anti-cancer drugs and that is the thing which they have not come to terms with," Dr Orem said.

He said, according to the new Act,

OUT OF STOCK DRUGS

Injectables. These include bleomycin used to treat Hodgkin's lymphoma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, testicular cancer, ovarian cancer, and cervical cancer.

Ondansetron. Used to prevent nausea and vomiting caused by cancer chemotherapy. Dexamethasone, carboplatin, ciprofloxacin tablets, vincristine, reagent for tumor marks, 5-fu (Fluorouracil).

NMS should be responsible only for ordinary drugs but not specialised medicines for cancer.

"The only thing I can say is that there is no will to make the legislation work. If it worked this entire thing will be history. You will be assured of quality, timely drugs and effective treatment," Dr Orem said.

The Health Ministry's Permanent Secretary, Dr Diana Atwine, yesterday told this newspaper that a meeting held last week asked NMS and UCI to resolve the hullabaloo about the drug shortages quickly to save patients' lives.

Resolution

"We had a meeting this week after realising that there were no drugs.

That's when we called for the two parties but I have been told that it's being rectified," Dr Atwine said.

However, Dr Atwine threw the blame back at UCI.

She said UCI officials submitted their drug orders to NMS "very late", an accusation Dr Orem denies.

"What can I do if people (NMS) are not able to provide quality, timely and enough specialised drugs? We know how to solve this problem but there is no will," he said.

"Patients are dying due to an inadequate system. We are always victimised. By the way NMS wanted to purchase an oxygen plant but I advised that we should instead buy drugs which we don't have," Dr Orem further stated.

But Mr Kamabare told *Daily Monitor* yesterday that UCI has requested NMS to purchase a machine for medical gases and they had to reserve the funds.

Asked about the delayed implementation of the new law that empowers UCI to purchase its own drugs, Dr Atwine said: "It's something that will happen gradually because the new law requires systems to be created for it to become operational."

Last year, UCI management had a protracted friction with NMS over alleged inflated drug prices far above the local and international market rates and the questionable quality of drugs.

Daily Monitor then reported details of a leaked government audit report accusing NMS of irregular and insufficient budgeting for drugs and sundries and dubious pricing.

However, NMS quickly dismissed the claims in the audit report.

Procurement Process

NMS publicist Dan Kimosho said the Uganda Cancer Institute submits its procurement plan [to NMS] at the beginning of every financial year but is supposed to follow up with monthly orders to allow NMS deliver their demands.