

Herbalist accused of mixing ARVs in herbs

BY CAROL KASUJJA

The Police in Mityana district are searching for a herbalist, only identified as Joseph, who produces his herbal medicine in Nateete, Kampala, but sells it in Mityana, Wakiso and Mubende districts. He is suspected to be giving his clients who are suffering from HIV concoctions, but mixing them with ARVs.

The alleged behaviour of the herbalist was discovered after The AIDS Support Organisation (TASO) officials were on a tour to find out why their clients' viral load was too high, yet they were on medication.

The victims told the team that Joseph takes away their antiretroviral (ARV) drugs and gives them herbal medicine at a fee of sh500,000 per dose. It is believed he uses the very ARVs he gets from the patients to mix in the herbal concoction.

"We investigated and probed each patient and we were shocked to find out that there is a herbalist who tells them that ARVs increase one's chances of dying, but his herbal medicine, elongates their life," said a psycho-social counsellor with TASO, Mulago, (names withheld) said.

The councillor revealed that some patients told them that whenever they take the herbal medicine, they feel a lot of relief and that was why they had given up on the ARVs medicine.

"We reported the matter to the Police; went to the man's home in Mityana, but failed to trace him.

Asked whether they have information about other fake herbalists who are misleading patients on ARVs, Mark Kamanzi, the National Drug Authority legal manager, said they were carrying out investigations to verify the reports.

Dangers of mixing medicines

Dr Winnie Namuddu of Nyago Medical Centre says mixing antiretroviral drugs with traditional herbs may have negative effects on someone's health, and is, therefore, strongly discouraged.

There are mixed beliefs about modern and herbal medicines. Some people believe herbal medicine is more effective than modern medicine. Others believe herbal medicine has no side effects.

"Taking herbal and modern medicine at the same time could also lower the metabolism (how fast the drug works or is absorbed) of the drug. If the drug stays in the body beyond the time it is supposed to, there are higher chances of developing side-effects. Therefore, one needs to tell their doctor what they are taking," Namuddu said.

Namuddu also says since no one knows what more is mixed in the herbal concoction, there is a danger of damaging the patient's liver.

Dr Peter Kiwalabye of Kasawo Health Centre says taking herbal medication without considering the dosage is risky, there might be less or more of the active ingredients in the mix. And if the virus is being attacked by an under-dosage, chances are high that it will multiply and mutate faster. In the end, the viral load increases, while the CD4 count goes down, making the patient's condition worse.