

Patients fault NDA on medicine access

PHARMACISTS PETITION

Aggrieved. Patients claim that as a result of the ban on opening pharmacies, the cost of medicine has risen in some drug facilities.

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KAMPALA. A group of patients have petitioned the Pharmaceutical Society of Uganda (PSU), accusing the National Drug Authority (NDA) of introducing new licensing guidelines which they say are infringing on their rights to access medicine easily.

The contentious guidelines contained in the 2018 draft by NDA bans, among others, opening new pharmacies in Kampala, and major towns and stops pharmacies from operating wholesale and retail sections in the same premises.

Under their umbrella body, the Patients' Network, the petitioners say the guidelines are likely to undermine the strides made by government in improving healthcare.

"We are deeply concerned that this will deny patients access to pharmaceutical services. It is further contrary to NDA's mandate which is to ensure availability of medicines in the country," the December 7 petition reads in part.

As a result of the ban on opening pharmacies, the petitioners argue



Affected. A lady arranges drugs at a pharmacy. The National Drug Authority wants to stop new pharmacies from being opened in Kampala and other major towns.

PHOTO BY ALEX ESAGALA

that costs of medicine will shoot up as findings from their survey have indicated that some clinics sell drugs, including painkillers at prices 10 times higher than those in the pharmacies.

The petitioners also accuse the authority's board of wasting time and resources on court cases, including the construction of NDA offices and employees, among others, which are not related to improvement of drug quality.

They also question the two per cent tax charge by NDA on imported drugs, failure to appoint a patients' representative on the authority's board, as well as employing non-drug experts in the authority.

"This [ban on new pharmacies] is an infringement on our rights as patients to access medicine and we condemn it in the strongest terms,"
PATIENTS' PETITION

In response, however, the NDA acting secretary, Ms Helen Ndagire, said the guidelines are meant to ensure equal distribution of drugs in the country because Kampala is over served.

"We are doing this in their [patients] best interest. We are going to clean up the pharmaceutical sector. It is an effort to implement

standards. For example, a retailer who is buying drugs needs some space to have a discussion about the prescription which is not possible if the wholesale section operates in the same premises," Ms Ndagire said.

On the issue of the patients' representative missing on the board, she quoted the law, saying it has to be a member of the public and not necessarily a patients' representative. She also said the taxes charged by NDA are provided for by the law.

Other issues about the relocation of the authority and the court cases, Ms Ndagire said, they can only be responded to by the board.

Pharmacists under their umbrella organisation, Uganda Pharmacy Owners Association (UPOA) have also accused NDA of refusing to reduce the bureaucracy in opening new pharmacies. The UPOA chairman, Mr Hassan Isabirye told a press conference in Kampala that Uganda Pharmaceuticals Association is one of the mushrooming illegal drug shops which are meant to benefit individuals within the authority. "Those people have on several occasions blocked the opening of new pharmacies and opted to open small illegal drug shops which they benefit from. We want them to address the issues we have always raised to them," Mr Isabirye said. They (pharmacists) have petitioned Speaker of Parliament Rebecca Kadaga to discuss the proposed ban by NDA on the opening up of pharmacies. Ms Helen Ndagire, also the director product safety at NDA, said she was aware of the issues raised by the pharmacists and that they were being worked on.