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Expert advises patients to sue health workers

BY JACQUILINE EMODEK

DR Sylvester Onzivua, a consultant pathologist at Mulago Hospital, has encouraged Ugandans to sue health workers if they do not provide the required health services.

Onzivua's suggestion follows numerous complaints about negligence by health workers at medical facilities, which has resulted in death in extreme cases.

Presenting a paper at a conference in Kampala on Thursday, Onzivua noted that some health workers often take advantage of patients' ignorance to get away with careless practices.

"I know of a lady who lost her only son and therefore had done tubal ligation so she wanted to have another child which is impossible. However, a doctor said he could untie the tubes. In the end, she died during surgery," he narrated.

Onzivua was making a presentation on "Placing Medical Law in realising the right to health and universal health coverage in Uganda," during the meeting on patients'

rights and responsibilities law at Fairway Hotel in Kampala. Onzivua proposed that medical malpractice should be addressed as a criminal case and not a civil case, as is the case today.

"We need to put a clause in the Patients' Charter that highlights the quality of healthcare under the duty of the doctors to the patient," he said.

Geoffrey Bulayi, the programme co-ordinator at the Uganda National Association of Private Hospitals, noted that health workers financially exploit patients by making them undergo several unnecessary tests and prescribing medication.

Moses Talibata, the legal officer of Uganda National Health Consumers Organisation, said patients have a right to quality healthcare since they are the biggest funders of the health sector.

"Where accountability is absent, achieving the right to health and universal health coverage are empty promises," said Robina Kaitiritimba, the executive director of the Uganda National Health Users' and Consumers' Organisation.

However, Mbweekamwa Gaffa, the MP

for Kasambya County, who also sits on the parliamentary committee on health, said health workers cannot entirely be blamed for a patient's failure to recover.

"If I go to a hospital and get quality service, but return home and drink unboiled water, I will still fall sick. We must consider other social determinants before blaming health workers," he said.

Gaffa cited the example of the late Iganga Woman MP, Grace Hailat Kaudha Magumba, who died at Mulago Hospital in Kawempe after developing pregnancy-related complications.

"She did not attend any antenatal care, despite being six months pregnant and knowing the importance of the service," he said.

Grace Ssali Kiwanuka, the executive director of the Uganda Healthcare Federation, said patients' knowledge about their rights was critical as Uganda plans to set up a National Health Insurance Scheme.

"If people do not understand how insurance works, then how will it be sustainable?" she said.



Onzivua a consultant pathologist at Mulago Hospital