

# Law to allow electric shock for mental treatment in offing

By Moses Walubiri

A Bill seeking to overhaul the current legal regime on mental health treatment in Uganda is in the offing, with Parliament's health committee set to begin public dialogue over the same next week.

If enacted in its current state, the Bill, dubbed the Mental Health Bill, 2014 will introduce a raft of new aspects to mental treatment tailored towards keeping Uganda in sync with modern trends in mental health care.

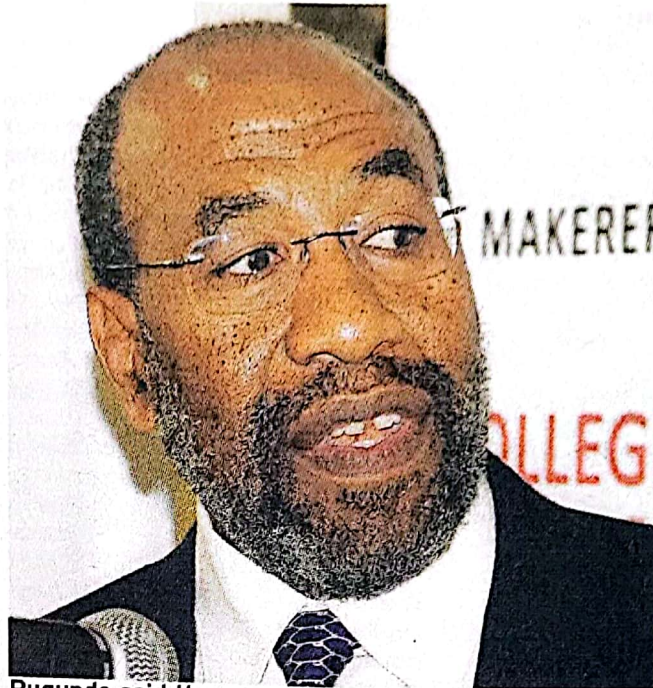
One of the modern methods of mental treatment that the Bill is seeking to introduce is electro-convulsive therapy.

Electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) is a procedure, done under general anesthesia, in which small electric currents are passed through the brain, intentionally triggering a brief seizure.

ECT seems to cause changes in brain chemistry that can quickly reverse symptoms of certain mental illnesses.

The ECT procedure was first conducted in 1938 and is the only currently used form of shock therapy in psychiatry.

More than 70 years after its introduction, many countries, including the United Kingdom and Wales, have amended their laws to require consent of a patient or the next in kin before



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ECT is applied.

Under the Bill, consent is required for involuntary treatment, although this can be waived, where the therapy is deemed to be in the interest of the involuntary patient by the psychiatrist.

However, for a voluntary patient, psychiatrists are barred from administering ECT without their (patients') explicit consent in order to avoid litigation over claims of battery.

"It's true our committee has

scheduled meetings starting next week," health committee chairperson Dr. Michael Bukenya told *New Vision* yesterday.

The Act that the Bill seeks to repeal, the Mental Treatment Act, was enacted in 1964 and, according to then health minister and current Prime Minister Dr. Ruhakana Rugunda, the law is "outdated."

"The Mental Treatment Act does not take into account the discovery of medicine and

other treatment interventions that have revolutionised the care of persons with mental disorders," Rugunda noted in the Bill's preamble.

The framers of the Mental Treatment Bill contend that the current legal regime on mental treatment emphasises removal of individuals suffering from mental disorder from society without due consideration for clinical care.

The other aspect the Bill seeks to introduce is voluntary admission to a hospital or health facility by individuals who feel they are afflicted with psychiatric disorder.

Under the current law, only a magistrate, upon proper examination by psychiatrist, can adjudge a person to be of unsound mind.

The Bill condemns the discrimination of individuals on account of suffering from psychiatric disorder and brutalising of those undergoing treatment.

The Bill also seeks to operationalise the National Health Policy, which identifies mental health services as an integral component of health care.

Under the National Health Policy, mental health is included as a component of the national minimum health care package. It is now part of the health ministry budget.