

## National News

# Rising Ebola cases: How worried should we be?

According to doctors, the treatment of Ebola is largely managing the symptoms and complications (supportive treatment). This is in addition to the psychological care because of the fear of death.

BY TONNY ABET

**A**s the cumulative number of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) reported by Uganda's Ministry of Health rises to seven, with over 120 people placed under quarantine, the tough containment measures are beginning to disrupt movement and livelihoods. In moments like this, it is normal to feel concerned or worried.

Prof Pontiano Kaleebu, the director of Uganda Virus Research Institute (UVRI), in an exclusive interview with the *Daily Monitor*, explains how Ugandans should react to the outbreak and whether there is a cause for worry.

"We should worry, but not worry too much," says Prof Kaleebu. "The reason is that Ebola is a dangerous disease. It kills, and we have experience. People have died; we saw they died in Gulu, they died in West Africa, and recently, many died in DR Congo."

The virologist says the main focus should be on the prevention of the disease. "If it increases, then movement, people's activities may be curbed, which is not good, and people and the country will be affected socially and economically," he says.

"So we need to prevent the spread. It can affect us socially, it can affect us economically, it can affect us in many other ways...but it can be prevented from spreading," he adds.

Dr Tonny Musoke Sekikongo, a consultant physician at Mulago Ebola Treatment Facility, says the Ebola Bundibugyo strain, which has caused an outbreak in Uganda and DR Congo, is one of the viruses for which there is no approved vaccine and no approved therapeutics.

"In the previous outbreak, we had case fatality rates ranging from 30-50 percent. It is a very deadly disease," he says.

Prof Kaleebu says it is not very easy to say a particular strain of Ebola virus is more deadly than the other. The other strains which have caused outbreaks in Uganda are Ebola Sudan and Ebola Zaire.

"In the first outbreak of Bundibugyo Ebola virus, the case fatality rate was 30 percent. But the second outbreak caused by the strain in DR Congo, it was about 50 percent. And now, we don't know how it will be," he says.

"But the best studies are done in animals. In animal studies, it is shown that Zaire, Sudan, Bundibugyo (Ebola virus strains), (fatality rates) are slightly different. If you do animal studies, you don't intervene; you can see the difference, but in humans, it's a little



A scientist conducts tests at the Viral Hemorrhagic Fever Lab at the Uganda Virus Research Institute on May 20. PHOTO/TONNY ABET

bit difficult because there are other factors," he adds.

Uganda has had different strains of the Ebola virus causing outbreaks. But the Ebola Sudan strain has been one of the commonest strains behind the outbreaks.

## What's the chance of surviving after infection?

Prof Kaleebu says the chance of surviving after an Ebola infection caused by any strain of Ebola can depend on how effectively the patient was managed.

"We need to know that it (death risk) also depends on how you intervene. For example, when Europeans and Americans suffered in West Nile, in Congo, and they were flown to Europe, they were given the best of care, and they didn't have people die," he notes.

Dr Musoke says the chance of survival often depends on how quickly the patient is managed. He also reveals that some people do not progress to disease after exposure to the Ebola virus, partly linked to the dose (quantity of virus) they were exposed to, and their body immunity.

"We have seen another possibility where you can have a silent or subclinical infection, and then people get better afterwards. But also, the other outcome is that the patient can progress to the disease," he explains.

"These symptoms usually have an order in which they will present, depending on the number of days from the start of symptomatology. So the early symptoms can include symptoms like fever, severe headache, and muscle pains," he adds.

## Severe stages

As the disease progresses, the symptoms become more severe.

"So we can have severe sore throats coming in. You can have chest pain,

abdominal pain. Then you have diarrhoea and vomiting," Dr Musoke says.

"And these gastro-intestinal (stomach) symptoms, including hiccups, epigastric pains, are severe and usually lead to complications if not checked at that point in time," he adds.

Dr Musoke says one of the late symptoms is bleeding. "We see bleeding in just about 30 percent of the individuals. And even then, when it comes, it's a very late sign, and it is a poor prognostic factor," he says. "The only chance we have to prevent them from going into these late signs and symp-

toms is if we start management of these patients early."

According to doctors, the treatment of Ebola is largely managing the symptoms and complications (supportive treatment). This is in addition to the psychological care because of the fear of death that the infection poses to the patients.

## Two new cases

Dr Olaro Charles, the director general of Health Services at the Ministry of Health, in a statement, yesterday said they have detected two new cases of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in the country. This brings the cumulative cases reported by the Ministry to seven with one death. About three of the cases were imported from DR Congo.

Dr Olaro said the two new confirmed cases are Ugandan health workers working in a private health facility in Kampala.

"Both patients have been admitted to the designated treatment unit and are now receiving care. All contacts linked to the confirmed cases are being listed for follow up by response teams," he said.

"Members of the public are advised to immediately report anyone presenting symptoms consistent with Ebola Virus Disease to the nearest health facility. Early detection and treatment greatly improve chances of survival and help prevent further spread of the disease," he added.

Information from the ministry indicates that over 120 contacts of previous Ebola patients were under quarantine by last week. This will increase as people test positive and their contacts are also traced.

Some people test positive for Ebola later, as they are under quarantine, because the virus has an incubation period of 2-21 days, the time it takes to manifest symptoms.

## ABOUT EBOLA

### Prevention

- Avoid physical contact with anyone showing the Ebola symptoms.
- Practice hand washing and maintain good hand hygiene at all times.
- Avoid contact with body fluids that include urine, blood, sweat, saliva, vomitus, and stool.
- Seek appropriate health care services immediately when you experience Ebola-like symptoms.
- Dead bodies of suspected Ebola patients should be supervised by the health team
- All public places should institute hand-washing facilities at their premises.

### Symptoms of Ebola

- Sudden onset of fever
- Fatigue
- Chest pain
- Diarrhoea
- Vomiting
- Unexplained bleeding