

By Jacky Achan

In 2011, a senior doctor at Masindi Hospital was suspended and his practicing license withdrawn by the Uganda Medical and Dental Practitioners Council (UMDPC) over professional misconduct.

The council had found him guilty of gross professional misconduct having failed to attend to an emergency case leading to the death of a patient.

In 2016, UMDPC also revoked a practicing license of a medical practitioner attached to St Anthony's hospital, Tororo over professional negligence.

The council found the doctor guilty of leaving a towel in the uterus of a first-time mother following a caesarean section.

The towel induced an infection that severely damaged the uterus leading to its removal.

In February this year, a couple dragged Life Link hospital in Kampala and its doctors to the Civil Division of the High Court.

The hospital and doctor are accused of delaying to operate a heavily pregnant woman (complainant), an act of negligence the couple claims led to their newly-born son suffering brain damage.

In medical practice, the duty to act ethically lies at the very origins of the profession and requires a new physician to swear a Hippocratic Oath, to uphold specific ethical standards.

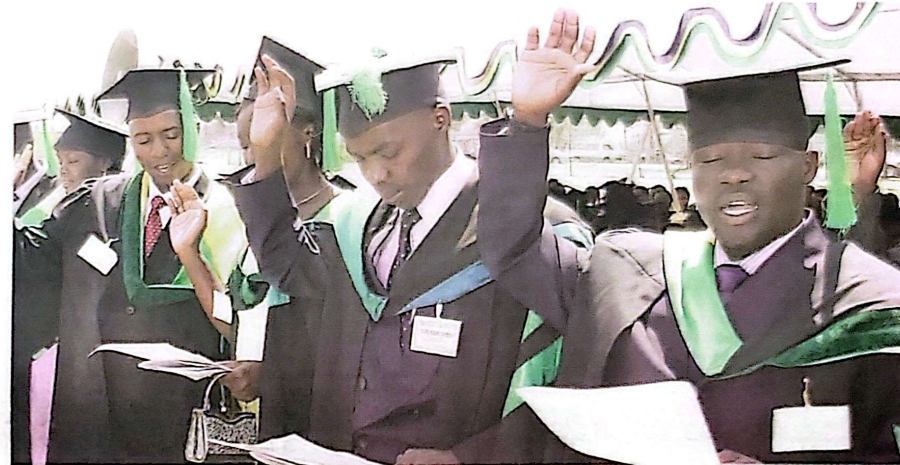
It, among others demands that a physician will treat the ill to the best of their ability, preserve a patient's privacy, and teach the secrets of medicine to the next generation.

The President of Medical Interns, Dr Robert Lubega, says under the Hippocratic Oath the doctor first pledges to take care of self and health, to best take care of people.

But other key pillars of medical ethics under the Hippocratic Oath are confidentiality and autonomy. "If a patient says no to treatment and they are of a sound mind the doctor has to adhere and should not go ahead with the treatment.

Doctors also have to respect a patient's privacy. They cannot examine a patient on the bed during ward rounds, they have to respect a patient's

Ethics for medics should be emphasised at school



Graduands of medicine and surgery from Mbarara University of Science and Technology take the oath in 2006

privacy," he explains.

Where is the problem

Dr Obuku Ekwaru, the president of the Uganda Medical Association (UMA), says the training of ethics is poor at the undergraduate level.

"If it is not given attention and immediately dealt with, it can affect the practice," he says.

Ekwaru explains that some students come into medical school but cannot move ahead, even if they come with excellent marks.

"There are lots of complaints about attitude of some students in medical schools. You wonder if they actually passed or found their way round to study medicine.

You cannot also help but wonder if they were forced to study medicine or are genuinely interested because of that attitude. We need more checks for this," he says.

What can be done?

To check and pick those with interest in medicine, Ekwaru says there should be pre-entry exams just like it is for the case



Obuku Ekwaru

of law at Makerere University.

Such an exam will neutralise and weed out those who cheated and those who are not actually qualified to study medicine even if they have the highest of scores needed to study medicine.

Important too for Dr Ekwaru is that the regulatory mechanism is reinforced.

"We UMDPC want the capacity to legally discipline errant medical practitioners

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to ensure high levels of ethics is practiced. We can jointly do this with the Uganda Medical Association," he says.

Lubega says the health ministry should also ensure that all the required resources are made available to the doctors in service, to serve people and ensure high standards of ethics are practiced.

"A doctor cannot touch a bleeding patient with bare hands in this era of HIV and Hepatitis. They will tell the care taker to go buy gloves and medicines very time

medical care is crucial," he explains

He adds: "The issues of pay or even delayed payment, lack of medicine equipment can also see a physician get compromised when it comes to ethics.

All conditions that ensure a conducive work environment need to be addressed and improved to ensure ethical standards are high and respected.

This is in addition to reinforcing the teaching of ethics at undergraduate level

THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH

I swear by Apollo, the healer, Asclepius, Hygieia, and Panacea, and I take to witness all the gods, all the goddesses, to keep according to my ability and my judgment, the following Oath and agreement:

To consider dear to me, as my parents, him who taught me this art; to live in common with him and, if necessary, to share my goods with him; To look upon his children as my own brothers, to teach them this art; and that by my teaching, I will impart a knowledge of this art to my own sons, and to my teacher's sons, and to disciples bound by an indenture and oath according to the medical laws, and no others.

I will prescribe regimens for the good of my patients according to my ability and my judgment and never do harm to anyone.

I will give no deadly medicine to any one if asked, nor suggest any such counsel; and similarly I will not give a woman a pessary to cause an abortion.

But I will preserve the purity of my life and my arts.

I will not cut for stone, even for patients in whom the disease is manifest; I will leave this operation to be performed by practitioners, specialists in this art.

In every house where I come I will enter only for the good of my patients, keeping myself far from all intentional ill-doing and all seduction and especially from the pleasures of love with women or men, be they free or slaves.

All that may come to my knowledge in