

Thousands get fake Hepatitis B vaccine

MBARARA

By Abdulkarim Ssengendo

The vaccine against hepatitis B that was given to people in western Uganda was unregistered, possibly unsafe and probably fake, Dr Medard Bitekyerezo, the chairman of the board of the National Drug Authority, has said. He revealed this at a press conference held in Mbarara Municipality on Sunday.

Bitekyerezo said they had information with evidence that some people in Mbarara and Ntungamo districts were producing labels of the hepatitis B vaccine, repackaging it and the fake vaccine had been supplied to different health units and hospitals. He said the vaccine had been injected into thousands of innocent Ugandans.

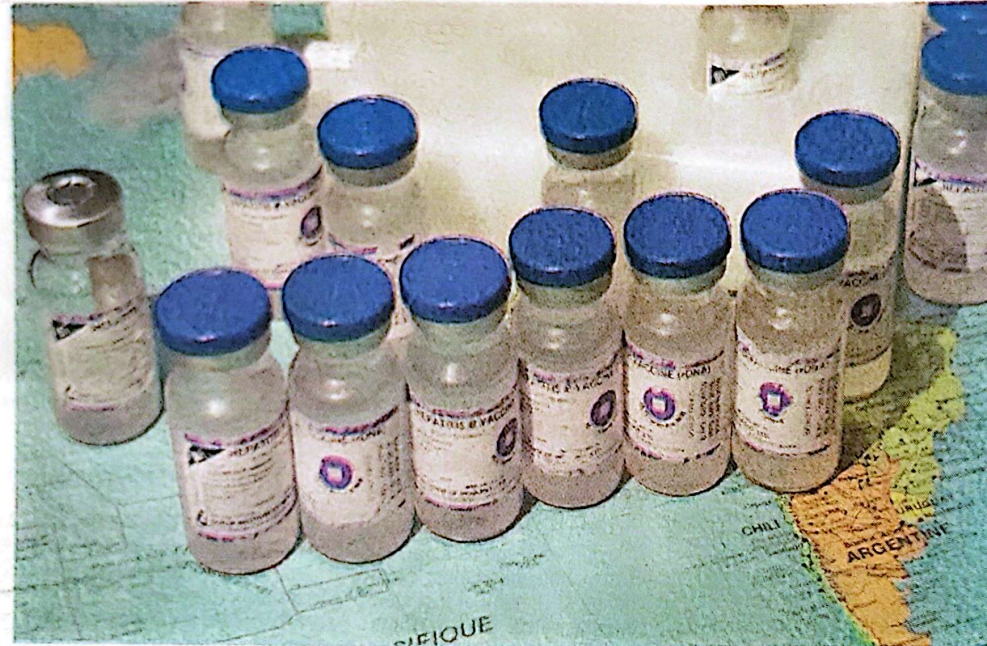
"These people must be having a packaging plant in Uganda. We don't know the chemicals that were given to Ugandans," an angry Bitekyerezo said.

He said they had retrieved the drugs from different hospitals and health units in Mbarara and Ntungamo and have started a hunt for the suppliers.

Without disclosing names, Bitekyerezo said some people who were supplying the vaccines, had been arrested and recorded statements with the Police.

"My officers in the western zone did a very commendable job and retrieved some of these vaccines from health centres. If anybody falls sick, the heads of institutions where they were vaccinated from will answerable," Bitekyerezo said.

The offence will become severe if we take these drugs to Kampala,



Some of the counterfeit hepatitis B vaccines that were confiscated. Photo Abdulkarim Ssengendo

compare them with others and notice any chemical other than that which should be in the vaccines we want," Bitekyerezo added.

Some of the health facilities and hospitals that were implicated told *New Vision* that they got the vaccines from Kampala-based health units.

Bitekyerezo was not happy with the hospital owners that used the wrong vaccine for not buying the vaccine from reliable pharmacies that are accredited by the NDA.

"Heads will roll. I am warning my

ON THE GROUND

■ Medard Bitekyerezo said the suppliers of the fake vaccines must be having a plant in Uganda. He said the authority would investigate the chemicals given to Ugandans

colleagues in the medical profession, stop being ignorant when you have got

a degree. Do not use a drug when you don't know where it has come from. Someone cannot come to your hospital hawking vaccines and you buy them. It is an illegality because vaccines must be bought, from well-known licensed pharmacies, he added.

Dr Farida Khaukha, the NDA officer in charge of the western region, also said the vaccine used was wrong.

"These vaccines are not yet authorised for use in Uganda. Vaccines that have got doses for 10 people should be in government facilities. The ones that

should be used in private institutions should be single units, so anybody is using the 10-dose ampules is probably stealing them from government or using vaccines not authorised," he added.

Zabrone Igirkwayo, an inspector of drugs, said most of the vaccines didn't have dates of manufacture on their labels keep fading. He said that the original drugs should be labelled as property of the Government of Uganda.

Benson Muntu, the administrator of Homely Medical Centre put the blame squarely on the Government for not being keen on the supervision and regulation, especially on the importation of drugs.

He commended the board chair of NDA for declaring opening up the illegal sale of drugs. "In the past you would take 20 years without seeing NDA coming to visit your facility. I am sure Bitekyerezo will clear this," he said.

"We have a lot of demand from the community and such demand can lead us to look for the suppliers who can find in open markets while the drugs are bought from these accredited pharmacies. NDA should carry out regular checks and balances to ensure the importation of counterfeit drugs that it does not affect the community," he said.

David Kitengye, the LC3 chairman of Bucuro sub-county in Mbarara district wondered what the Uganda National Bureau of Standards was doing that could not prevent such drugs entering the country.