Stigma threatens TB, leprosy fight in Nwoya

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BY TOBBIAS JOLLY OWINY

Health workers in Nwoya District have raised concern over persistent stigma and discrimination against patients suffering from leprosy and tuberculosis (TB), warning that the vice continues to undermine efforts to eliminate the diseases.

In Nwoya, an average of six to eight TB cases are registered every week, highlighting the continued burden of the disease in the district. Health officials also record about six new leprosy cases annually, a figure they say reflects both ongoing transmission and gaps in early detection.

In February, the district health department conducted a series of outreach activities across all 11 sub-counties and town councils. During the exercise, 5,956 individuals were screened for TB and 16 tested positive.

Despite these interventions, district health leaders say stigma remains one of the biggest barriers to success.

In an interview, Dr James Okello, the acting district health officer, said discrimination against suspected patients is discouraging many people from coming forward for testing and treatment.

"We noted a lot of stigma associated with tuberculosis and leprosy. This remains a significant barrier in implementing our intervention strategies across the district," Dr Okello said.



Locals test for TB at a mobile lab at Akia Primary School in Lira City on July 18, 2025. PHOTO/TOBBIAS JOLLY OWINY

He added that many patients fear being isolated by their communities, which leads to delayed diagnosis and continued spread of infection.

Nationally, about 99,000 people develop TB each year, including approximately 1,342 cases of multidrug-resistant TB. In 2025 alone, an estimated 9,900 people died from the disease.

The Ministry of Health has set an ambitious target of eliminating both TB and leprosy by 2030.

To achieve this, authorities are rolling out innovative community-based approaches such as the CAST campaign — Community Awareness, Screening, Testing, Prevention and Treatment — as well as the Detect TB initiative.

According to the ministry, these interventions have contributed to improved access to diagnosis and care, with treatment success rates sustained at above 90 percent.

However, in districts such as Nwoya, stigma continues to reverse some of these gains. Dr Okello also cited infrastructural challenges as a major obstacle to service delivery.

"We face the problem of limited health infrastructure, particularly in sub-counties without health centres. Some communities remain hard to reach due to long distances and a poor road network, especially during adverse weather conditions," he said.

Despite these setbacks, the Ministry of Health says TB treatment coverage has improved from 54 percent in 2022 to 91 percent in 2025.

Dr Charles Olaro, the director general of Health Services, stressed the importance of early diagnosis and treatment in achieving the country's elimination targets. "Tuberculosis and leprosy are preventable, treatable and curable diseases. Let us encourage our communities not to wait until they start coughing or begin feeling numb before seeking support," Dr Olaro said.

BACKGROUND

According to Ministry of Health data, Uganda is among the high TB burden countries globally, with about 99,000 people developing TB annually. Of these, approximately 1,342 cases are multidrug-resistant TB, which is more difficult and costly to treat. In 2025, an estimated 9,900 people died from TB, making it one of the leading infectious disease killers in the country.

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