

Govt should ensure access to new HIV drug

The National Drug Authority (NDA) on Monday announced the approval of the new twice-yearly injectable drug for HIV prevention for use in the country.

This drug, lenacapavir, was tested in Uganda and South Africa, where researchers found it was more than 99 percent effective in preventing HIV infections among participants who were considered to be at high risk.

Information from the Ministry of Health indicates that around 38,000 doses will be received in March to enable a rollout to people in need. These doses are enough for around 19,000 people, a quantity which might be too low given the growing interest in the drug and the large number of persons that need to be targeted to avert large numbers of new infections.

The issue:

HIV drug.

Our view:

The government should also encourage the private sector to import this drug so that Ugandans who can afford, should buy.

Uganda currently registers around 37,000 new HIV infections per year. The country is also remaining with only four complete years to reach 2030, the time the country has committed to ending HIV/Aids as a public health threat.

According to information from the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/Aids (UNAIDS), the 2030 target requires the country to "reduce new HIV infections by 90 percent from 2010 and a continued five percent decline per year after 2030". UNAIDS also states that the country should "reduce Aids-related deaths by 90 percent from 2010" and "secure the sustainability of the HIV response through 2030 and beyond".

According to the Uganda Aids Commission, the country should be registering fewer than 10,000 new infections to meet

the 2030 elimination target. The rate at which HIV infections have been declining in Uganda is too slow to meet the 2030 target, and thus, a radical action is required. According to our analysis of the government data, in the last five years, the number of annual new infections dropped from 53,000 to 36,648, which is a reduction of 16,352 or 3,300 per year.

One of the radical interventions to achieve the elimination is to maximise the potential of new technologies like lenacapavir. The other interventions include intensifying campaigns to increase the use of condoms, being faithful to one's sexual partner and the use of other existing pre-exposure and post-exposure drugs in reducing HIV infections.

Lenacapavir is priced at \$28,000 per person per year, but the generic version is expected to be available at \$40 per person per year. There's thus a need for government and civil society to push for the availability of affordable versions of the drug, while ensuring that quality and efficacy are not compromised.

The 38,000 doses expected in March will be purchased through the Global Fund. The Ministry of Health has not stated a clear position of whether they will buy more doses for Ugandans to ensure widespread access. The government should be seen prioritising this through action of putting public resources to procure some of these latest technologies, like lenacapavir, to revitalise the fight. The government should also encourage the private sector to import this drug so that Ugandans who can afford, should buy.

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