

Gulu Hospital officials say deeply rooted cultural beliefs and myths, particularly linking TB to witchcraft, are causing many patients to seek medical care only when the disease has reached an advanced stage.

BY JAMES OWICH

**A**uthorities at Gulu Regional Referral Hospital have attributed the persistently high prevalence and rising mortality rates of tuberculosis (TB) in the Acholi Sub-region to poor health-seeking behaviour among the population.

TB-related deaths have increase by about five percent. Hospital officials say deeply rooted cultural beliefs and myths, particularly linking TB to witchcraft, are causing many patients to seek medical care only when the disease has reached an advanced stage.

On average, the hospital registers about 800 new TB cases every quarter, translating to roughly 266 new cases each month across the sub-region.

According to data from 2021, TB prevalence in the Acholi Sub-region stood at 7.4 percent, with a higher prevalence among females at 9.3 percent compared to 5.3 percent among males.

Dr Phillip Okot, the medical officer in charge of TB and leprosy at Gulu Regional Referral Hospital, said the region remains heavily burdened by the dis-

# High TB rate in Acholi blamed on poor health-seeking habits

ease.

"With an average of 800 new TB cases every quarter, it means more effort is required to fight this disease," Dr Okot said.

He expressed concern over a rise in drug-resistant TB cases, alongside increasing deaths linked to TB complications.

"We immediately start treatment for patients who test positive. However, we are seeing an increase in drug-resistant TB in the community, and TB-related mortalities are also rising. Currently, we record between five and eight percent mortality due to TB complications," he adds.

Dr Okot called upon political leaders in the former war-ravaged sub-region to intensify community mobilisation efforts to encourage early health-seeking behaviour.

"Our political leaders should encourage people to go for screening. Early detection will prevent complications associated with TB," he said.

Despite the challenges, Dr Okot expressed optimism that the newly acquired mobile TB clinic will significantly improve TB detection and treatment in the region.

Uganda continues to record about 200 new TB cases per 100,000 people annually, a figure considered high as the country works towards ending TB by 2030.

## ABOUT TUBERCULOSIS

Tuberculosis is an infectious disease caused by bacteria that primarily affects the lungs and spreads through the air when infected individuals cough, sneeze, or spit. TB is both preventable and curable.

## Mobile TB clinics

On Thursday, the Ministry of Health delivered a Shs1.8 billion mobile TB clinic truck to Gulu Regional Referral Hospital. The vehicle is equipped with a modern X-ray machine, a laboratory, and AI-assisted medical equipment aimed at strengthening community outreach services.

Mr Nelson Modi, the clinical coordinator for the mobile TB clinic at the Ministry of Health, said the government has so far procured 16 mobile TB vans for regional referral hospitals nationwide to enhance early TB detection.

"This state-of-the-art mobile lab will reach deep into communities as we move towards ending TB by 2030. It allows for early detection, and patients can be started on treatment immediately," Modi said. "Regions that have already received these mobile clinics have recorded improvements in TB detection and treatment."

He said rural communities have especially benefited from the mobile TB clinics.

"We have had individuals who tested positive, received treatment, got cured, and returned to productive lives within their communities," he said.

Mr Modi added that Uganda is on track to defeat TB, citing increased funding and investment in healthcare infrastructure.

"If these investments are fully utilised, we will significantly reduce TB prevalence. We have the necessary lab technicians, clinicians, and radiologists to address the burden," he said.

The mobile clinic is expected to address challenges related to access to TB services, especially in hard-to-reach areas.

"This van can travel to rural communities and test over 100 people for TB in a day, and even conduct up to 200 laboratory tests daily. No positive case should be missed," Mr Modi said.

"We will also provide integrated services, including screening for hepatitis B and hypertension," he added.

A recent Ministry of Health report indicates that about 60 percent of HIV patients in Uganda have also been diagnosed with TB.

Dr Peter Mukobi, the director of Gulu Regional Referral Hospital, said the mobile clinic will help bridge healthcare access gaps in rural communities.

"Poor health-seeking behaviour is influenced by factors such as distance, poverty, and myths. This mobile TB clinic will enable us to reach underserved populations and counter misinformation through accurate health messages delivered by trained professionals," Dr Mukobi explained.

The mobile TB clinic will also serve neighbouring sub-regions, including West Nile and Lango.

Nationally, an estimated 50,000 people are diagnosed with TB each year, while the disease claims over 10,000 lives annually, making it one of Uganda's leading causes of death.

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Globally, about a quarter of the world's population is estimated to be infected with TB bacteria. While most do not develop symptoms, about five to 10 percent will eventually develop active TB.

According to the World Health Organisation, approximately 1.23 million people died from TB in 2024, including 150,000 people living with HIV.

TB was also the leading cause of death among people with HIV and a major contributor to deaths related to antimicrobial resistance.