

From classrooms to computers, Butabika's initiative shows how technology can unlock potential and support reintegration for those recovering from mental illness.

BY TONNY ABET

**A** new digital community centre at Butabika National Referral Mental Hospital is reshaping mental healthcare by integrating digital skills training into rehabilitation efforts as the facility struggles to handle the rising number of patients.

This initiative expands access to online learning and digital resources for patients, hospital staff, and the surrounding community.

Learners describe the colourfully painted, fully equipped facility, featuring computers, skilled trainers, and internet connectivity, as an inclusive hub that fosters skill-building and helps them break free from the stigma that previously blocked their path to empowerment and learning.

Mr Denis Mubiru, who is in the recovery stage after mental health treatment at Butabika Hospital, is among the key beneficiaries. He also serves as a peer support worker at the hospital, helping other patients recover more quickly and reintegrate into society.

Mr Mubiru highlights how the centre provides a valuable opportunity for those in recovery, especially given the stigma they often face in the wider community, which can limit access to such training.

"I train patients how to recover and how to go back to their community in the recovery stage. At first, I didn't have computer skills, but when this program came, I said, since it is free of charge, I can enrol and start training," he narrates.

**Advantages.** "So, by having this facility, we are going to be able to rehabilitate these young people, to develop digital skills which will be very useful when they go back into the community because they will be able to get skills that can help them get some skills to work, and other opportunities online," **Dr Juliet Nakku, the director of Butabika Hospital**

"When I came, I found that the trainer and I have been getting quality knowledge here. Being a person with lived experience is not easy; it comes with a lot of stigma," he adds.

Mr Mubiru has acquired a variety of computer skills that are proving essential for his livelihood, particularly in research.

"When you come to a good facility like this, it is like a home, you gain the skill, and then you go back to the community, and then you use it to make money, it helps you a lot," he reveals.

"The skill has helped me improve my research work, whereby I can comfortably use Microsoft Word, PowerPoint and so on," he adds.

Ms Deborah Mbabazi, the trainer and manager of the digital community centre, outlines the progress since its es-



A mother learns computer skills in the new digital centre in Butabika Hospital on March 7. PHOTO/TONNY ABET

## Digital hub offers lifeline to Butabika Hospital patients

tablishment in 2024. To date, the centre has trained at least 466 individuals, with the majority being young people.

"We major in introduction to computer, Microsoft Office – Word, PowerPoint, and Excel, and Internet – emails and social media," she says.

Dr Juliet Nakku, the director of Butabika Hospital, explains that the centre empowers recovering and recovered patients to become more productive, reintegrate successfully into society, and acquire future-ready skills. She says the facility was set up with funding and technical support from partners American Tower Corporation (ATC Uganda) and the Rotary Club of Butabika Royals.

"A Digital Community is a digital laboratory, where people are able to come and access computers, learn to use of computer and the Internet. This facility is going to be part of our rehabilitation program in this Hospital," she says.

She continues: "Butabika Hospital is managing a lot of young people who develop mental ill health and then become dysfunctional as a result of their illness, or [those who] develop mental illness when they are very young and have not had a chance to develop certain skills."

"So, by having this facility, we are going to be able to rehabilitate these young people, to develop digital skills which will be very useful when they go back into the community because they will be able to get skills that can help them get some skills to work, and other opportunities online," she adds.

Dr Nakku says the 550-bed hospital

has more than double the number of patients that the hospital was built to handle. There are 1,200 patients admitted currently, with the majority being young people.

Butabika Hospital also has an occupational therapy department where they teach recovering patients a range of skills as part of the holistic approach in mental health treatment. The skills imparted include tailoring, carpentry and baking, among others, which are essential in creating independence and have been proven to improve reintegration into the community to reduce stigma and readmissions.

### AI model to improve access

Dr Nakku reveals that they are developing AI models that can reach everybody in the country who requires men-

tal health support.

"We are very few mental health workers in the country. So, we want to put a model in our call centre that can help everyone in the country access us for support, counselling and related interventions," she says.

"We are now training people here, in this digital community centre, to be able to use those facilities that we are developing," she adds. The facility's call centre number for mental health support is 0800211306.

Commenting on the progress, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Health, Mr Emmanuel Ainebyoona, says the government will collaborate with partners to ensure the facility continues to get the support they require to handle patients. He also says the hospital should improve its digital media presence.

### THE KEY ISSUES

Digital hubs are emerging as powerful tools in mental health care by combining technology, education, and therapy to improve patient outcomes. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2023), integrating digital tools and telemedicine into mental health services can expand access, particularly in regions with limited healthcare personnel. Digital hubs provide patients with skills training, online resources, and peer support, which not only aid

recovery but also reduce stigma and enhance social reintegration. WHO highlights that technology-driven mental health interventions can strengthen health systems by enabling remote monitoring, psychoeducation, and early intervention, especially for youth and marginalised populations. By offering a holistic approach that merges rehabilitation with digital literacy, such hubs can empower patients to achieve independence, increase employability, and better manage their mental health long after leaving the hospital.

"So, if we could get a chatbot that can automatically respond to questions. There are so many people out there who need help out there but they cannot access it. So, you need to make more digital-friendly options available to clients to access mental health services," he notes.

### Motivation

Ms Dorothy Kabagambe Ssemanda, the chief executive officer of ATC Uganda, a company that provides wireless telecommunication across the country, says they constructed the facility in Butabika because of the need.

"Mental health is a very important topic in our country, one that we don't talk about and yet Butabika Hospital has been at the helm of supporting the rehabilitation of mental health patients for a long time," she observes.

Mental health cases in Uganda have been steadily rising, placing significant pressure on the country's healthcare system. According to the Ministry of Health, outpatient visits for mental health increased from 491,013 in 2020–21 to 616,175 in 2023–24, representing a 25 percent surge over three years.

A significant proportion of these cases, about 30 percent at Butabika National Referral Mental Hospital, are linked to alcohol and substance abuse, highlighting the complexity of challenges faced by mental health providers. Broader national data suggest that approximately 12 percent of Ugandans aged 10 and above experience psychological distress, contributing to a 16 percent increase in outpatient mental health visits in the 2023–24 period.