

By Juliet Anna Lukwago

Students from across the country have called for urgent action to address the growing burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) among young people. This was during a schools' African Union (AU) mock debate hosted by St Joseph's Secondary School Naggalama in Mukono district.

The annual debate, held on March 22 at the school premises, attracted participants from several institutions and debate clubs under the theme: *Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) among adolescents in Africa is a creeping crisis.*

The event brought together hundreds of students, who assumed the roles of representatives from different African countries and deliberated on health challenges affecting the continent, mirroring proceedings of the AU.

Participating schools included St Joseph's SS Nsambya, Kira College Butiki, Seeta High School, Hamdan Islamic SS Nakifuma and St Cyprian SS Kyabakadde, among others. Activities began with a ceremonial march and singing of national anthems before delegates broke into committees for discussions.

TACKLING NCDS

During the debate sessions, students representing countries such as Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Ethiopia and Rwanda highlighted key challenges in tackling NCDs, including limited access to medicines, high treatment costs and long distances to health facilities.

They noted that many patients are often given prescriptions, but fail to access medication due to high prices in private pharmacies, while public health facilities frequently face stock-outs.

"Patients travel long distances seeking treatment, only to return home without drugs," one student observed, adding that overstretched health systems and a shortage of health workers are compromising quality of care.

The students also linked the rising NCD burden to lifestyle factors such as poor diet, physical inactivity, alcohol consumption and drug abuse, calling for increased awareness and prevention programmes targeting young people.

The Commissioner for Health Services in charge of NCDs at the health ministry, Dr Charles Oyoo Akiya, who officiated as chief guest, commended the initiative for empowering youth to engage in national and continental health discussions.

"While we have made progress in other areas of health, we must now double our efforts to combat NCDs. Awareness, prevention and stronger health systems are critical, especially for the young population," he said.

Dr Akiya called for greater collaboration among stakeholders to improve access to care, strengthen patient management systems and enhance data collection for informed

ST JOSEPH'S SS NAGGALAMA HOSTS AU-STYLE DEBATE ON NCD CRISIS

PHOTOS BY JULIET ANNA LUKWAGO



Seated-right: The commissioner of health services for non-communicable diseases at the health, Dr Charles Oyoo Akiya, the headmistress of St Joseph's SS Naggalama, Agnes Nsubuga (centre) with other officials and participants after the debate at Naggalama



The students linked the rising NCD burden to lifestyle factors such as poor diet, physical inactivity, alcohol consumption and drug abuse

decision-making.

He also warned about the growing threat of drug and substance abuse among youth, linking it to increased vulnerability to NCDs and other long-term health complications.

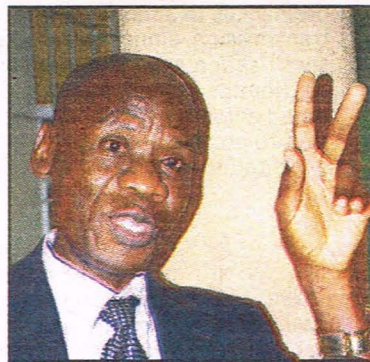
"It is important to equip young people with accurate information to counter misleading narratives around drug use and promote healthy lifestyles," he added.

The health ministry, he said, is working to increase the availability of essential medicines for NCD patients and strengthen integrated care across the country.

The headmistress, Agnes Nsubuga said the debate provided a platform for



Seeta High School students consult each other during the debate



Dr Akiya addresses participants

students to critically engage with real-world challenges while sharpening their public speaking and analytical skills.

"As educators, we aim to nurture

not only academic excellence, but also healthy and responsible individuals. A sound mind thrives in a healthy body," she said.

Nsubuga noted that changing lifestyles among young people, including increased consumption of fast foods and reduced physical activity, are contributing to the rise in diseases once associated with older populations.

She urged students to adopt healthier habits, remain physically active and avoid drug and alcohol abuse, warning of long-term consequences.

The school's debate patron, Grace Kamulya, said the event is part of a broader NCD awareness campaign targeting learners, while also nurturing talent and confidence in public speaking.

"This platform allows students to interact, exchange ideas and become advocates for change in their communities," Kamulya said, inviting more schools to participate in future editions.

Organisers said the debate, now in its second year, builds on last year's theme which focused on mental health challenges among students.

RISING NCD BURDEN

Non-communicable diseases, including cardiovascular conditions, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory illnesses, are increasingly becoming a major public health concern globally and in Africa.

Health experts warn that although infectious diseases remain prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa, NCDs are projected to become the leading cause of death by 2030 if preventive measures are not scaled up.

Nearly half of the population in this region already suffers from hypertension (high blood pressure), a well-established precursor to NCDs such as heart attacks and strokes.

Risk factors such as unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, tobacco use, alcohol consumption and drug abuse are particularly common among adolescents, making early intervention critical.

Stakeholders at the debate called for multi-sectoral efforts, spanning education, health and community systems, to curb the growing epidemic and safeguard the future of Africa's youth.