

# Iganga Hospital receives sickle cell testing machine

By Ivan Wakibi

Iganga health authorities have welcomed the donation of a modern sickle cell testing machine. The authorities say the move is timely, considering that health workers have been facing challenges in diagnosing the disease, which is rampant in the area.

Sickle cell disease is an inherited condition affecting red blood cells. The most serious type, sickle cell anaemia, causes blood cells to change shape, live shorter lives and block blood vessels. It is a lifelong condition with no cure yet, but early diagnosis and treatment can make a big difference.

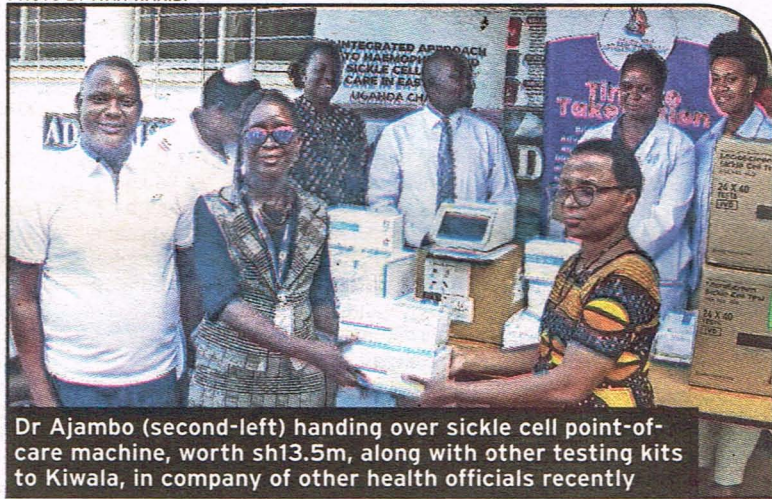
The sickle cell point-of-care machine, worth sh13.5m, along with other testing kits, was handed over to the health ministry sickle cell focal person, Dr Miriam Ajambo, district health officials and other leaders at the hospital.

## TESTING BABIES

Deputy district health officer Dr Karim Muluya Mwebaze said the hospital attends to 1,300 sickle cell patients, but the number could be beyond that if they had the testing machines.

Mwebaze said it is important to test babies immediately after birth to detect the disease for urgent medication. He

PHOTO BY IVAN WAKIBI



Dr Ajambo (second-left) handing over sickle cell point-of-care machine, worth sh13.5m, along with other testing kits to Kiwala, in company of other health officials recently

added that the hospital could not initially afford this due to a lack of the machine and rapid testing kits.

Mwebaze hailed the donation by Raising Hope International Friends, a non-governmental organisation, saying they have been taking samples from persons with sickle cell symptoms to the health ministry in Kampala. He said as a result, getting results would take a long time, weakening patients before treatment.

Ajambo expressed concern over the high sickle cell disease burden in eastern and northern Uganda compared to other regions.

She said despite the disease prevalence standing at 13% in the country, the region stands at 25% of persons with sick cell treats/cells which is a high risk to produce babies with the disease.

Ajambo appealed to partners who wish to marry to first check their

## FACT CHECK

# 1,300

*The number of sickle cell patients the hospital has been attending to. According to district health officials, the number might increase since they have a testing machine.*

sickle cell status, so that they prevent producing sick children.

In a previous interview, Dr Anne Akullo, a paediatric haematologist at Mulago Hospital and president of the Uganda Paediatrics Association, said awareness is the first step in prevention.

“People need to understand that sickle cell disease is genetic. You get a gene from each parent. If you only have one gene, you are a carrier. You will not have symptoms and you might never know until you have a child with another carrier,” she said.

Akullo emphasised the importance of pre-conception testing, not just pre-

marital screening.

“Many couples already have children by the time they think about testing. Testing before pregnancy helps prevent passing on the disease unknowingly,” she said.

For each pregnancy between two carriers, there is a 25% chance the child will have sickle cell disease. That does not mean one out of four children will have it – it means every single pregnancy carries that 25% risk. A couple could have four children and all of them could inherit the disease, or none might.

Ajambo revealed that the ministry will hold the sick cell commemoration day celebrations this year in Jinja on Friday next week, aimed at sensitising health workers and the public about preventing the disease.

Raising Hope International Friends executive director Isaac Okello said the machine is effective and timely as it gives results within hours, so that patients, especially babies, can start receiving medication immediately.

Iganga assistant resident district commissioner Caroline Kiwala appreciated the donation and asked residents to embrace testing services rather than seeking medication from traditional herbalists.