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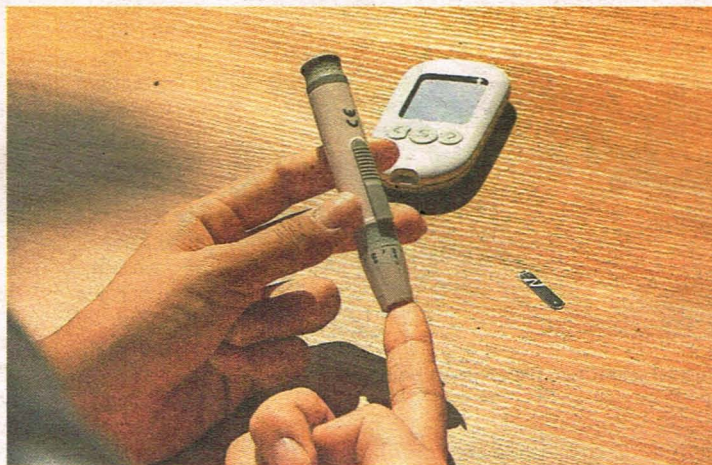
Dr Jackson Orem

In Uganda, as in many low- and middle-income countries, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cancer and diabetes are emerging as major public health threats. Once overshadowed by infectious diseases such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, and tuberculosis, NCDs are now forcing a reevaluation of health priorities, as they account for an increasing share of illness, disability, and premature death across the country.

Diabetes, a chronic condition caused by insufficient insulin production or ineffective insulin use, is becoming increasingly common. The 2023 national NCD Risk Factor STEPS Survey found that about 3.3 percent of adults live with diabetes, although recent studies suggest higher rates. A 2026 systematic review estimated prevalence at nearly seven percent, while rural studies during the Covid-19 pandemic reported prevalence as high as 11.3 percent. Many cases remain undiagnosed.

The World Health Organisation estimates that about 89 percent of Ugandans with diabetes are unaware of their condition or not receiving treatment. This lack of diagnosis contributes to severe complica-

The rising tide of cancer and diabetes in Uganda



tions such as kidney failure, stroke, heart disease, blindness, nerve damage, and amputations. Cancer is also a growing concern. Approximately 34,000 new cases are recorded annually, though the actual number may be higher due to limited screening.

Data from the Uganda Cancer Institute indicate that more than 77,000 people were living with cancer over a five-year period, with nearly 36,000 new cases and about 25,000 deaths each year. Common cancers include cervical and breast cancer among women and prostate cancer among men, as well as oesophageal, Kaposi's sarcoma, and stomach cancers. Late diagnosis, limited treatment access, and high medical costs remain major challenges.

Shared risk factors

Diabetes and cancer share several

modifiable risk factors, many linked to rapid urbanisation and lifestyle changes. Increased consumption of processed foods, reduced physical activity, obesity, tobacco use, and alcohol consumption all contribute to rising disease rates.

Urban lifestyles, often characterised by sedentary work and unhealthy diets, increase vulnerability to both conditions. Limited awareness and low screening rates further worsen the situation, as many people seek medical care only after complications develop.

The impact extends beyond physical health. Families face financial strain due to the high cost of long-term treatment, including insulin, chemotherapy, and diagnostic tests. Chronic illness can reduce productivity, create emotional stress, and deepen poverty, especially among

low-income households.

NCDs are now estimated to account for more than one-third of all deaths in Uganda, highlighting their growing national significance.

Health system response

Uganda's health system has begun responding to this growing crisis. The Ministry of Health, with support from partners such as the WHO and the World Diabetes Foundation, is integrating NCD screening into primary healthcare services.

Initiatives such as the D-CARD Africa Project aim to strengthen early detection and management of diabetes and related conditions. Health workers are also receiving training in integrated NCD care, and awareness campaigns promote healthier lifestyles and early screening.

Addressing the growing burden of diabetes and cancer will require stronger prevention strategies, including promoting healthy diets, encouraging physical activity, reducing tobacco and alcohol use, and expanding access to affordable screening and treatment.

Integrating NCD care into existing services, such as HIV and maternal health programmes, could improve early detection and outcomes.

Ultimately, reducing the burden of these diseases will require coordinated efforts from government, healthcare providers, communities, and policymakers.

By improving awareness, strengthening healthcare systems, and addressing lifestyle risks, Uganda can slow the rise of cancer and diabetes and protect the health of future generations.

The writer is the executive director, Uganda Cancer Institute