

How diverted contraceptives threaten women's health

Uganda spends billions on free family planning, but leakages cost millions and widen unmet need, writes **Walter Mwesigye**.

Every year, the Government of Uganda, with support from development partners, procures millions of dollars' worth of family planning commodities, including condoms, contraceptive pills, injectables and implants. These supplies are distributed to public health facilities to ensure women and couples can plan their families safely and affordably.

Yet, some of these commodities never reach their intended beneficiaries.

Instead, they are diverted into private pharmacies and clinics, where they are sometimes sold, despite being publicly financed and clearly labelled for free distribution. Among the products reported to have leaked into the private sector are Medroxyprogesterone Acetate, commonly known as Depo-Provera, Implanon and the copper T IUD.

In the last financial year, Uganda spent Shs5 billion on family planning

commodities to enable those who cannot afford them to access them for free of charge. However, this writer found two government "not-for-sale" products in a private pharmacy being illegally sold at Shs3,500 and Shs11,000, respectively.

The government says it is aware of the problem.

Daniel Aguma, a senior pharmacist at the Ministry of Health, explains that the situation partly stems from an earlier strategy aimed at expanding access.

"As a strategy to increase access, at one point government partnered with the private sector to deliver or to increase access of the family planning products in the private sector. In essence, drug stores, clinics, and pharmacies were selected, accredited, using a government programme and government systems, and they would be given some selected free family planning goods," he says.

"But later on, of course, we noticed that some of the transactions were improper or unauthorised. When we reviewed around a hundred dozen commodities, we found that only five or 10 had actually been treated as out of stock. It became clear that these individuals were finding market for these commodities outside the country and in other areas. Using our monitoring systems, we identified this activity and subsequently terminated



Some of the government-labelled injectable contraceptives recovered during an inspection. PHOTO/WALTER MWESIGYE

ISSUE

Uganda continues to invest billions of shillings every year in family planning commodities intended to be provided free of charge in public health facilities. However, growing concerns over leakages of these supplies into private sector channels are raising alarm among health experts, who warn that the practice is costing the country millions and worsening the unmet need for family planning.

the collaboration with a number of those involved."

While there is no official consolidated national figure quantifying exactly how much Uganda loses annually due to such leakages, global and national cost analyses show that failing to meet family planning needs comes at a very high price.

According to research by the Guttmacher Institute, meeting all unmet need for contraception among adolescents in Uganda would cost about \$19m (Shs69.5b) annually.

Without that investment, however, the country spends more than \$115m, (Shs421.1b) each year managing unintended adolescent pregnancies and related maternal and newborn healthcare. That is more than six times the cost of prevention.

"For young people who are already sexually active, we have seen parents confidently bring them to public facilities to access contraception. It is good as it protects them from getting pregnant, dropping out of school, thus allowing them to be children, go through adolescence, complete

their education and continue their aspirations," says Ritah Tweheyo, the head of grants at Marie Stopes.

Uganda's unmet need for family planning remains significant, with roughly one quarter to one third of women who want to avoid pregnancy not using modern contraception. When contraceptives are unavailable in public facilities due to stock-outs or diversion, unintended pregnancies increase.

Research shows that meeting even half of the unmet need for contraception in Uganda could avert more than half a million unintended pregnancies and significantly reduce pregnancy-related deaths.

Consequences

Unintended pregnancies increase pressure on already stretched maternity wards, raise the risk of maternal complications, contribute to unsafe abortions and strain household incomes. Also, when subsidised public commodities are sold in private outlets, they undercut legitimate private distributors, weakening efforts to build a sustainable and complementary private sector for family planning services.

Dr Moses Okello, the programmes manager at DKT Healthcare International, says the leakages distort the market.

"Once the family planning commodities leak, people tend to sell them in the SRH black market, which impacts the private sector. The commodities already brought by private sector players become slightly expensive because they are black market commodities from the public sector. This constitutes what we call market inefficiencies and market failure," he says.

Experts argue that strengthening accountability from procurement and storage to last-mile distribution, is critical to ensure every shilling invested in family planning delivers value.

The spokesperson of the National Drug Authority, Abiaz Rwamwiri, says the regulator continues to disrupt the black market and arrest those found culpable.

"We have arrested more than 70 health workers and some have been sentenced for being involved in the theft of government drugs. We have recovered drugs worth more than Shs15b since 2019, but how much actually slips through the dark?" he says.

He adds: "Drugs are going in wrong hands and during the process of stealing them, their quality gets compromised due to poor transportation. It is estimated that government loses up to between 40 and 50 percent drugs leaving government stores not going to the patients who actually need them."

Responding to the matter, the Director General of Health Services, Dr Charles Olaro, warns that more stringent measures are being put in place to stamp out the vice.

"Currently, the law is weak, unable to address the punishment. However, if caught with government commodities and you are convicted, you should be de-registered from service because you are no longer able to uphold ethics and professionalism. Because you have actually killed somebody because you have denied them access to vital commodities," he says.

He adds: "As a ministry, we have launched what we call the total market approach so the pharmacists and the drug shops can be able to provide commodities at subsidised rates and people should be able to pay for them. But, this commodity should be very different from the ones which are being provided from government."

\$19m

Cost.

The amount it will cost Uganda to meet all unmet need for contraception among adolescents