

Hantavirus: Uganda not at risk, health ministry assures public

BY TONNY ABET

KAMPALA. As more hantavirus cases are reported abroad, Uganda's Ministry of Health has urged the public not to panic, saying the country faces no immediate threat.

"It is not of concern to us in Uganda," Dr Daniel Kyabayinze, the director of Public Health at the ministry, told *Daily Monitor*. "It has a known mode of transmission that requires vectors and contamination of food."

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), hantaviruses are a group of viruses carried by rodents that can cause severe disease in humans.

Eight new cases, including three deaths, were recently reported among travellers on a cruise ship from Argentina heading to the Canary Islands in Spain.

Dr Allan Muruta, commissioner for the Epidemiology and Surveillance Department at the Ministry of Health, said Ugandans should remain calm because the risk of infection is low.

"We are monitoring, and the risk is very low. Having a person undergoing treat-

ment in South Africa does not mean there is an outbreak there. Hantavirus has existed for centuries, and the risk of contracting it is very, very low," he said.

Several strains of hantavirus have infected and killed people for centuries, particularly in the Americas, Europe and Asia. According to Gavi, about 200,000 global cases and hantavirus-like symptoms are reported annually.

People are usually infected through contact with rodents or their urine, droppings and saliva. Infection can result in severe illness and death.

While strains common in Europe and Asia kill between 5 and 15 percent of infected people, newer strains such as the Andes virus can kill between 30 and 50 percent.

The Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) stated that, by May 4, seven cases of hantavirus infection had been identified, including two laboratory-confirmed and five suspected cases. WHO later reported one additional case.

"Among these, three fatalities have been recorded; one patient remains in critical condition under medical care in South Africa, and three individuals are

WHO GUIDES ON CARE

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experiencing mild symptoms," Africa CDC said.

The agency advised member states to strengthen port health services, reinforce infection prevention and control measures, and ensure timely reporting of suspected cases.

Prof Samuel Majalija, a scientist in the Department of Biosecurity, Ecosystem and Veterinary Public Health at Makerere University, said the virus was unlikely to develop into a global pandemic because the outbreak had been contained.

"The chance of it becoming a pandemic is minor. It will not be a full-blown pan-

demic because the outbreak has been contained on that ship on the island. The risk of human-to-human transmission is very low," Prof Majalija said.

Evolution of hantavirus

A study by Mohammed Mir of the College of Veterinary Medicine at Western University of Health Sciences in the United States explains the origins of the virus.

"In 1978, the disease-causing agent of Korean haemorrhagic fever was isolated from a small infected field rodent, *Apodemus agrarius*, near the Hantan River in South Korea. The virus was named Hantaan virus after the river," the study states.

Gavi reports that although hantavirus has largely remained endemic in Europe and Asia, a species known as Sangassou virus was isolated in an African wood mouse in Guinea in 2006.

"Further seroprevalence studies suggest its presence in Côte d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, although no human cases have been reported," Gavi stated.

The organisation added that hantavirus pulmonary syndrome (HPS), also known as hantavirus cardiopulmonary

syndrome (HCPS), is considered a "New World" disease because it was first isolated in the 1990s.

"Since then, it has become endemic across North and South America, with species such as Andes virus being of particular concern in Chile and Argentina," Gavi added.

Prevention and management

According to WHO, prevention depends mainly on reducing contact between people and rodents.

During outbreaks or suspected cases, health authorities recommend early identification and isolation of patients, close monitoring of contacts, and strict infection prevention measures to limit further spread.

WHO says there is currently no licensed antiviral treatment or vaccine for hantavirus infection.

"Care is supportive and focuses on close clinical monitoring and management of respiratory, cardiac and kidney complications. Early access to intensive care, when clinically indicated, improves outcomes, particularly for patients with hantavirus cardiopulmonary syndrome," the organisation states.