

EXPERTS RELEASE REPORT ON COVID-19 TREATMENT

PHOTO BY ALFRED OCHWO

NO SYMPTOMS

Half of the Ugandan patients diagnosed with COVID-19 did not have any of the symptoms of the disease at diagnosis, a multi-disciplinary research team, co-ordinated by the Makerere University Lung Institute, has revealed

By Charles Etukuri

The known COVID-19 symptoms, which were missing among 50% of confirmed Ugandan cases, include fever, cough, runny nose, headache, muscle aches and fatigue.

This finding of more than half of the patients being asymptomatic deviates from what has been reported elsewhere, where up to 80% of hospitalised patients were symptomatic.

"The fact that most of the patients do not have symptoms calls for rigorous case finding and contact tracing strategies," the report reads.

The multi-disciplinary research team, co-ordinated by the Makerere University Lung Institute (MLI), was headed by Dr Bruce Kirenga, the director of MLI and Prof. William Bazeyo, the deputy vice-chancellor of Makerere University, as the lead investigators.

Other researchers included Dr Henry Mwebesa, the director of general at the health service in the health ministry, Dr Baterana Byarugaba, the director of Mulago Hospital and his deputy, Dr Rosemary Banyima.

The team also found that the first group of patients (56) diagnosed and treated at Mulago and Entebbe hospitals, exhibited a clinical course of disease that was quite different from what has been observed in countries like China and the US, which have a high death toll.

The report has also urged the Government to add rhinorrhoea (runny nose) to symptoms for case screenings.

Presenting the report to the media, Makerere University vice-chancellor Prof. Barnabas Nawangwe noted that the report was the result of real interaction between researchers and the patients diagnosed with COVID-19 that is also known as the coronavirus.

"We partnered with the Ministry of Health and the Uganda Virus Research Institute, among others. As well as the hospitals where the people who contracted the virus had been admitted and treated, to study the behaviour of the virus," Nawangwe said.

According to the report, only two patients met the classification of severe disease that required oxygen therapy, while the rest had mild disease and they all recovered without the need for admission to the intensive care



Prof. Bazeyo, Prof. Nawangwe and Dr Kirenga during the press conference at Makerere University, yesterday

TREATMENT

In the absence of a known cure for COVID-19, the medics opted for treatments meant to alleviate the symptoms, while waiting for the body to mount an immune response to fight off the infection.

"The patients were able to recover on supportive care, through managing the symptoms, treatment with antibiotics for those who had and hydroxychloroquine and Vitamin C," Dr Bruce Kirenga, the director of MLI, said.

In instances where the patients had comorbid conditions, proper management of these conditions was part of the treatment. There was an observation that the patients who received hydroxychloroquine had shorter time to clinical recovery, although this did not reach formal statistical significance," he added.

unit (ICU) or ventilation.

THE RESEARCH

The study code-named COVIDEPI was funded by the Government through the Makerere University Research and Innovations Fund (MakRIF), and co-ordinated through MLI, the university's premier centre for lung science.

The main aim of the study was "to detail the characteristics and treatment outcomes of COVID-19 patients in Uganda".

Dr Kirenga noted that COVID-19 being a novel and rapidly changing pandemic, it was important that early lessons are obtained and synthesised from this epidemic.

This would ultimately feed into the clinical care guidelines and ultimately contribute to the country's interventions in effective management of the cases.

The group also found out that, the average age of the patients diagnosed in Uganda was 33 years, which is far lower than has been reported elsewhere in Asia and North America. In New York, for instance, the recorded average age is 63 years.

"The majority of the cases diagnosed in Uganda are males (68%) which continues to be the current trend in the country and is keeping with what has been noted elsewhere in the world," the report says.

Dr Kirenga noted that: "Coronavirus has been reported to affect almost all tissues in the body. To understand the extent of damage COVID-19 causes to the human body, we performed a wide range of tests, including a complete blood count, liver and kidney function tests, heart damage, lactate dehydrogenase, among others."

"We found that 10.6% of the patients had low white blood cells, 26.3% had low platelets and 12.8% had evidence of liver damage, while the kidneys showed no evidence of damage," he added.

"We also found that 12.2% had evidence of systemic inflammation. The electrical activity of the heart was also checked with the electrocardiograph, three patients had significant lung damage, while one of them had low oxygen saturation," he said.

The report notes that about 25% of the 56 patients reported having other medical conditions in addition to COVID-19.

"Most of the conditions were non-communicable diseases. Hypertension and diabetes accounted for 11%. High blood pressure was the most common comorbid disease recorded in up to

28% of the patients," Dr Kirenga said.

"The high blood pressure could be explained by the high prevalence of hypertension in this age category among the general population, but in addition to the anxiety caused by the fear of the disease. Four per cent of the patients treated had HIV."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Prof. Bazeyo urged the public to adhere to President Yoweri Museveni's directives and those of the health ministry.

"Wash your hands regularly with soap, use masks and avoid crowded places," Bazeyo said.

The research group recommended the expansion of testing for COVID-19 in view of the finding that almost half of those confirmed did not have the classic symptoms for COVID-19.

"Efforts should be taken to make clinical, laboratory and imaging tests available at all COVID-19 treatment centres to support proper grading of disease severity. At a minimum, pulse oximetry should be routine in management of patients diagnosed with COVID-19."

The team also recommended that the Government builds capacity to diagnose and treat non-communicable comorbid conditions across the country as part of the COVID-19 response. Equipment for the proper diagnosis of these diseases should be expanded.

COVID-19 was first reported early last December in Wuhan, central China and has since spread across all continents. Uganda reported the first confirmed case of COVID-19 on March 21 and had of May 22 registered 222 cases.

REPORT FINDINGS

10.6% PERCENTAGE OF THE PATIENTS HAD LOW WHITE BLOOD CELLS

26.3% PERCENTAGE OF THE PATIENTS HAD LOW PLATELETS

12.8% PERCENTAGE OF THE PATIENTS EVIDENCE OF LIVER DAMAGE

33 years THE AVERAGE AGE OF UGANDANS DIAGNOSED WITH COVID-19

