



"Together for Greater Impact"

# REPORT OF THE SECOND NATIONAL CANCER SYMPOSIUM



Held at Imperial Royale  
Hotel, Kampala, on December 7, 2023

## Executive Summary

Since its launch in February 2018, the National Cancer Symposium (NCS) has gained considerable traction as an avenue to foster stakeholder engagement, advocacy and collaboration in the cancer control space in Uganda. With funding support from the Commonwealth Foundation, Uganda Cancer Society partnered with Uganda Cancer Institute and the Ministry of Health to hold, on December 10, the second National Cancer Symposium under the theme “Driving Change Together: Adopting the National Cancer Control Plan (NCCP).” The theme sought to compel stakeholders to amplify the need for an enabling policy environment for effective cancer control interventions, specifically through fast tracking adoption of the National Cancer Control Plan. The development of NCCP is being led by UCI, with support from the civil society led by UCS and other development partners. It has therefore, been embraced by the Ministry pending adoption by the Top Management.

The 2023 symposium had 100 participants in attendance. These included, but are not limited to; Members of Parliament of Uganda, representatives of development partners such as the American Cancer Society and the World Health Organization, the Ministry of Health and other government ministries, civil society organizations supporting cancer patients and survivors, private health centers, key medical practitioners, the academia, opinion leaders, the media, as well as patients and survivors. The 3rd Deputy Prime Minister, who doubles as the Minister without Portfolio in the Office of the President of Uganda, Rt. Hon. Rukia Nakadama, was the Chief Guest. She reiterated government's commitments in the cancer sub sector and also pledged to support the NCS as a national level engagement platform.

There were presentations, panel discussions and plenary. Presentation by the UCI focused on the global and national context of cancer control, the objectives and significance of the Uganda National Cancer Control Plan. The panel had a cancer survivor from UCS, a Member of Parliament who is also Vice Chairperson Committee on Health, the Ministry of Health and UCI. The deliberations at this panel were premised on the adoption and implementation of the UNCCP. It should be noted that observations during the plenary informed some of the key actionable steps going forward. For example, participants emphasized the need to recruit more human resources, offering training for health workers, and extending cancer services to the underserved communities, among others. The Symposium offered an invaluable opportunity for stakeholders to review the progress made on the current National Cancer Control Plan (NCCP) and also to agree on what needs to be done to curb the growing cancer burden in the country. Further to this, discussions at the symposium provided a comprehensive overview of the achievements and challenges, facilitating a thorough assessment of the ongoing efforts in addressing the cancer burden in the country. Therefore, such conversations ought to be sustained, expanded and consolidated for fuller and satisfying interventions in the cancer control space in the country.

This comprehensive report highlights the key discussions, insights, and commitments made during the symposium.



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## 1.0 Introduction

Uganda, like many Low and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), is facing a significant rise in the burden of cancer. In 2020, it was estimated that there were 34,008 new cancer cases, 22,992 cancer deaths, and 62,548 adults living with cancer in Uganda (International Agency for Research on Cancer and cancer statistics. GLOBOCAN 2020). According to the International Agency for Research on Cancer, by 2040, there will be 77, 510 new cancer cases per year, an increase of 138%. The WHO Uganda Country Profile of 2020 indicates that in 2016, out of the 41,687 premature deaths due to Non-Communicable Diseases, cancer contributed 37.9%. The escalating number of cancer cases, coupled with the grim statistics on cancer-related deaths and the growing population of adults living with cancer, has underscored the urgent need for comprehensive action.

At the forefront of this battle is the Uganda National Cancer Control Plan (UNCCP), a carefully crafted national sustainable strategic plan to control cancer, based on the country's cancer burden, cancer risk factor prevalence, and the resources available to implement the plan in the context of the socio-economic environment and healthcare system in that country. While the UNCCP holds immense potential to mitigate the cancer crisis and reduce premature mortality rates, its successful implementation hinges on gathering the support and commitment of policymakers at various levels of government. The political will to allocate resources, enact supportive legislation, and drive essential processes is indispensable in bringing the UNCCP to life.

The 2nd National Cancer Symposium focused on mobilizing policymakers to recognize the urgency of addressing the cancer epidemic and urged them to take concrete steps towards adopting and implementing the UNCCP. The primary objectives were to increase commitment to resource allocation towards cancer control programs in Uganda and to improve the policy environment for cancer control.

This half-day event provided an engaging experience, seamlessly blending information dissemination with active participation. It served as a valuable platform for the exchange of knowledge, best practices, and innovative approaches to cancer control. The collaborative effort in sharing knowledge holds the potential to enhance the effectiveness of cancer prevention, treatment, and care strategies in Uganda.



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## 2.0 Structure of the symposium



### 2.1 Welcome remark

Mr. Denis Olodi, the Executive Director of the Uganda Cancer Society (UCS), officially opened the symposium by welcoming participants from various entities. He traced the origins of the cancer symposium back to February 2018, initiated in response to key resolutions from the 2017 WHO assembly. Highlighting the absence of a well-structured cancer control plan, a robust co-ordination framework, and a weak national cancer surveillance system. Mr. Olodi explained that the annual symposium was conceived as a platform to foster roundtable discussions on cancer.

Figure 1: Mr. Dennis Olodi welcomes participants



### 2.2 Opening remark by the Executive Director of Uganda Cancer Institute

Dr. Jatho Alfred, representing the Executive Director of Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI), made an opening remark. He conveyed apologies for the Director's absence due to other engagements. Dr. Jatho underscored the importance of the cancer control plan, emphasizing UCI's commitment to supporting its implementation.

Figure 2: Dr Alfred Jatho shares opening remarks

## 2.3 Remarks by the Minister of Health

The Minister of Health was represented by Dr. Juliet Nabbanja Katumba, a Commissioner at the Ministry. She expressed gratitude to the symposium organizers, commending their cooperation, deliberations, and commitment in the fight against cancer. She extended her thanks to the Prime Minister for serving as the Chief Guest and leading government efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goals and National Development Plans. Recognizing concerns about the country's cancer burden, she highlighted the Ministry of Health's dedication to developing strategies and initiatives that support effective interventions, citing the Test and Treat Initiative, decentralization of cancer services, and human resource capacity development, among others.

Emphasizing the significance of the National Cancer Control Plan (NCCP), she noted the centralized nature of the current cancer interventions and highlighted the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommendation for member states to develop such plans. She said, "the government is steadfast in its commitment to this goal, aiming to ensure a healthy and productive population". Dr. Nabbanja, in her concluding remark, urged stakeholders to collaborate in supporting the government's development and implementation processes, underscoring the National Cancer Symposium's crucial role in achieving broader aims in the field of cancer.



Figure 3: Dr Juliet Katumbagives a speech on behalf of the ministry of Health

## 2.3 Paper presentation

In setting the scope of the deliberations for the Symposium, the UCI Cancer Control Secretariat presented a paper themed: Comprehensive Insight into the Uganda National Cancer Control Plan (UNCCP): Objectives, Significance, and Implementation Overview.

Presented by Dr. Alfred Jatho, who is also a member of the Writing Team for the NCCP, the paper provided a comprehensive overview of the Uganda National Cancer Control Plan (UNCCP), characterizing it as a strategic initiative aimed at mitigating the country's cancer burden. The plan takes into account the prevailing cancer risk factors and strategically allocates resources for effective implementation. Dr. Alfred delved into key aspects, including target outcomes, disease burden, cancer risk factors, and the prevalence of modifiable risk elements in Uganda. He expounded on the plan's pillars, which encompass health promotion, early detection, diagnosis and treatment, palliative care, cancer survivorship, cancer surveillance and research, policy and advocacy, as well as specific considerations for cancer control in children and special interest populations.



Figure 4: Dr.Jatho presents an overview of the UNCCP to participants present.

## 3.0 Discussions

### 3.1 Expert panel on adopting the National Cancer Control Plan

The panel was chaired by Mr. Moses Echodu, a childhood cancer survivor and also head of the Uganda Child Cancer Foundation. Panelists include; Hon. Samuel Opio Acuti( Vice Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Health), Dr. Frank Mugabe( Principal Medical Officer and Cancer Focal Person at the Ministry of Health), Dr. Jatho Alfred ( Uganda Cancer Institute), and Mrs. Margaret Okello, a cancer survivor and co-founder of the Cancer Aid Organization(C.A.O). The panel looked at the present status of the UNCCP, the anticipated impact upon implementation, and strategies for government support during the implementation process.

Mrs. Margaret Okello expressed appreciation for the strides made by UCI and the government in advancing cancer care. However, she underscored several concerns related to existing challenges. She highlighted the urgent need for additional resources, citing issues such as delayed treatment during equipment breakdowns, inadequate counseling services, and a shortage of human resources. Notably, she emphasized the scarcity of counselors at UCI, where only two are available to cater to a substantial number of patients. In addition to these concerns, Mrs. Okello recommended providing financial support to cancer survivors to assisting other patients. She also drew attention to gaps in counseling services, a lack of nutrition knowledge, and the absence of written literature for patients at UCI, underscoring the significance of addressing these issues.

Dr. Jatho Alfred detailed the initiatives undertaken by the Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI) to address challenges and improve cancer care. He highlighted UCI's efforts, including the increase of human resources through the recruitment of more specialists, the provision of training to health workers at national and international levels, and the expansion of the institute to regions such as Mbarara, Gulu, Mbale, and Arua. In reference to the National Cancer Control Plan (NCCP), he noted that its intended approval in 2018 faced delays attributed to administrative bureaucracies. Nevertheless, there was optimism that the approval process is approaching its



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conclusion, as indicated by the Ministry of Health representative.

Dr. Mugabe Frank reported that the National Cancer Control Plan (NCCP) was nearing approval, having undergone a thorough cost estimation process. The plan was awaiting final approval from the top management of the Ministry of Health (MOH). Notably, certain components of the plan are already in the process of implementation. He acknowledged that the intricacy of the plan and the essential involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders have played a role in the prolonged approval process.

Hon. Dr. Samuel Opio deliberated on the legislative backing for the National Cancer Control Plan, emphasizing the government's dedication to allocating more resources to the healthcare sector. In November 2023, he noted, that parliament approved a supplementary budget of 30 billion for the acquisition of a PET scan. He underscored a preventive focus, with the health committee exploring the impact of aflatoxins through UNBS and addressing occupational risk factors for cancers through the Ministry of Gender. Although the budget for LEEP machines for cervical cancer prevention at regional hospitals did not receive approval, funds for regional cancer centers secured parliamentary approval. As a legislator, he advocated for coordinated planning across all sectors and highlighted the ongoing discussions surrounding the health insurance bill, anticipated to be advantageous for numerous patients.





Figure 5: Pictorial representation of the expert Panel

# The Plenary

The Plenary made observations which were captured by professional rapporteurs and presented by Mr. Olodi. These include;

- The need to integrate interventions under the NCCP with other interventions in the health sector. Dr. Opio revealed that parliament was debating a Bill to regulate alcohol consumption emphasizing the need for the NCCP to target issues in the said Bill. To this end, the MOH through Dr. Mugabe noted that integration guidelines have been drafted, considering various health conditions.
- Adoption of the NCCP: The National Cancer Control Plan (NCCP) is currently in the final stages of approval, signaling impending progress towards a comprehensive and coordinated strategy for cancer control in Uganda. It was presented and discussed at the Health Policy Advisory Committee of the MOH. The next stage at which it would be presented and possibly adopted was Top Management of the Ministry.
- Efforts around training individuals from the HIV sector and leveraging existing structures like the Uganda National Expanded Programme on Immunization (UNEPI) to harmonize efforts in addressing cancer, HIV, and immunization were also discussed and considered actionable.
- Health Insurance Bill Discussions: Ongoing deliberations on the health insurance bill reflected a positive step towards significant benefits for cancer patients, indicating a potential improvement in financial support and accessibility to care.
- Availability of equipment for trained health workers was noted as a very big gap: UCI made commitment that trained health workers in cancer prevention would be provided with the necessary screening equipment. Added that outreaches would leverage the available equipment, enhancing the feasibility of the plan.
- There was need to meaningfully work with cancer survivors to support patient navigation, counseling, awareness raising, and advocacy, among others.
- Parliament pledged direct support for the cancer control plan. Noted that certain components, such as the establishment of regional cancer centers, were already in the implementation process and parliament had approved funding for the same.
- It was noted that empowering Village Health Teams (VHTs) in cancer prevention is meaningful. It was noted that despite efforts by different partners to involve VHTs, there was need to explore ways to integrate them into cancer prevention efforts.
- There was a call for establishment of cancer registry. This was on the basis that there was insufficient data to support cancer advocacy.
- Low utilization of the available cancer control measures, specifically HPV vaccine. There was a call on parents represented at the symposium by politician, opinion leaders and community workers to encourage parents to send their children for HPV vaccination.





Figure 6: Pictorial representation of the Plenary discussion



## 4.0 Closing speech by the Chief Guest

The Rt. Hon. Rukia Nakadama, who is the 3rd Deputy Prime Minister and Minister without Portfolio in the Office of the President was Chief Guest. She had this to say;

- Thanked the organizers of the symposium for working with the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). She conveyed greetings from the President of Uganda and that of the Prime Minister who was away in India but had loved to be part of the symposium.
- Reiterated government's commitment to addressing the evolving challenges in the current complex world situation. Emphasizing the goal of fostering a healthy and productive population.
- Highlighted key initiatives, including the establishment of Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI) as a semi-autonomous institution for managing cancer control activities nationwide decentralizing cancer services to the regions of West Nile, Northern, Western and Eastern Uganda – as demonstration of government's efforts to support cancer interventions.
- Also mentioned the ongoing efforts to reintroduce the National Health Insurance Scheme Bill, 2019, which, she said, would be critical if cancer advocates were part of its advocacy.
- Pledged to be part of the ongoing efforts and also committed to participate in activities of the civil society led by UCS, including the National Cancer Symposium.
- Since the symposium was happening in the period towards Christmas, she concluded by extending holiday wishes, wishing members Merry Christmas and a Prosperous New Year 2024.



Figure 7: The Third Deputy Prime Minister ,Rt. Hon. Rukia Nakadama in attendance of the symposium and giving closing remarks on the right



## 5.0 Conclusion and recommendations

The National Cancer Symposium provided a platform for stakeholders to discuss, collaborate, and commit to the adoption and implementation of the National Cancer Control Plan. It demonstrated a collective dedication to driving positive change in the landscape of cancer control in Uganda.

We, therefore, offer the following recommendations to policy makers, cancer advocates, and all state and non- state actors;

- All stakeholders facilitate stronger connections between patient support groups, cancer survivors, community workers, and health care workers. This will help improve care, counseling, awareness raising and patients' involvement in the service delivery processes.
- Government ought to speed up adoption of the NCCP and allocates sufficient funds to support its implementation.
- Advocates understand policy makers and their information-seeking behavior to advance advocacy for adoption of the NCCP. Develop policy papers to communicate the need for the NCCP and why the country must have it adopted and implemented.
- Civil society led by UCS should build camaraderie among partners to encourage sharing information and learning between institutions. This will help others who need expertise around their respective areas.

In conclusion, we began the conversation through the initiation of the symposium as an annual stakeholder event where issues of national concern in cancer control are discussed. The partnership with the Government of Uganda through the UCI and MOH ensured adequate support, encouraged the usage of key resolutions arrived at, and has expanded and consolidated relations between the state and non-state actors. The National Cancer Control Plan, whose development has taken many years is finally reaching its last stage of adoption, and this commitment has emanated from such national level conversations. Over the course of the symposium, we learned that so much can be done if there is effective coordination, stakeholder engagement and collaboration. Ultimately, the symposium also helped reveal the need for more transparent decision-making and thinking about how to sustain advocacy efforts in the long term through synergy-building and cultivating strong relations with policy makers.

# National Cancer Symposium

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