

Scientists discover new infection in TB survivors

By Betty Amamukirori

Tuberculosis (TB) survivors will have to wait longer to celebrate their victory.

A new study in Uganda has discovered a new fungal infection that affects one in 15 survivors of TB, complicating efforts to treat the airborne disease.

The study, done by Gulu Hospital and the University of Manchester in the UK, also shows that the fungal infection is much higher among survivors of lung TB (pulmonary TB), with up to one in four (25%).

However, the infection, medically known as aspergillosis, is treatable.

The risk is higher in those with lung TB because after therapy, the infection leaves a cavity in the lungs of one in four survivors, which then becomes an easy target for chronic lung infection.

"These patients need to be followed up and treated if they develop the fungal infection," says Prof. David Denning, the chief executive of the Global Action Fund for Fungal Infections.

The research was published yesterday in the prestigious *European Respiratory Journal*.

Findings

During the study, 398 Ugandans with treated lung TB underwent tests, including chest radiography. Out of these, 285 were resurveyed two years later and 73 of them showed signs of chronic lung infection.

Prof. Denning says this new finding could influence TB programmes by helping doctors to identify and treat patients at risk of infection.

Dr Andrew Kazibwe, an expert in TB and also the in-charge of TB community interventions under the USAID Defeat TB project in Uganda, said the new findings add to the study done in Uganda regarding TB, especially its relationship with aspergillosis.

Dr Abel Nkolo, the Chief of Party of the USAID Defeat TB project, said the fungal infection is a common occurrence among TB patients, but there are no studies yet done on it, making this the first one.

He said in most cases, lung TB destroys the lungs, leaving them prone to opportunistic infections.

Nkolo said most patients present with chronic, bloody cough.

The study also revealed that those with the fungal infection present with signs and symptoms such as weight loss, fatigue, cough, breathlessness, chest discomfort and haemoptysis.

The study suggested carrying out routine tests in patients following treatment of lung TB, regardless of one's HIV status or time of completion of TB therapy.

Those suspected to be having the infection should have imaging, preferably with CT of the thorax, to confirm the diagnosis.

"We identified new cases occurring up to nine years after completion of TB therapy," the report noted.

According to the World Health Organisation, TB infections rival HIV/AIDS as a leading cause of death. Every year, 80,000 people are diagnosed with TB, yet only 50,000 are diagnosed with HIV/AIDS.