Young innovators want funding

By Hope Mafaranga

If innovations are fully funded, they will go a long way in improving neonatal and maternal health, young innovators have said during the 5th Annual Consortium for Affordable Medical Technologies (CAMTech) Uganda and Medtech hackathon held at Mbarara University of Science and Technology recently, the young innovators said they needed funds to actualise their ideas.

The innovators, who included clinicians, engineers, entrepreneurs, students and designers, meet annually, to develop innovative medical technologies to improve neonatal and maternal health in low-resource settings.

Titus Rukundo, a Primary Seven pupil of Preparatory Primary School in Mbarara, said they will not wait to become professors to find solutions to neonatal and maternal deaths.

"The time is now. Young have come up with an affordable medical technology, the Kangaroo+, a traditional modification of kangaroo care by combining a thermometer and skin-to-skin-contact to help children who are born prematurely keep warm," Rukundo, 13, who was one of the young innovators, said. He said they use their ideas to prevent deaths that are associated with child birth. Another significant innovation that was on display during the hackathon, was the Safe and Dry, a tool that helps women with fistula to hold urine and faeces.

The participants also came up with a device for treating menstrual cramps and a low-cost infant warmer, among others.

Dr Santorino Data, the director of CAMTech Uganda, said young people have fresh minds and ideas which they can use to innovate cheap technology to end maternal mortality in the country.

He said the winning teams will be monitored and helped to have access to milestone-based funding, a CAP coach, participation in the CAP Cohort, expert match-making and six-months of acceleration support.

"Each team will also compete in a 90-day post-hackathon engagement for membership in the CAMTech Accelerator Programme (CAP). CAP provides milestone-based funding, a CAP coach, participation in the CAP Cohort, expert match-making and six-months of acceleration support," Data said.

Prior to the hackathon, Data said they hosted a clinical summit featuring panel discussions focused on paediatric and neonatal health, nursing, midwifery, obstetrics and gynaecology.

"It is a time where we get to the problems affecting frontline health workers who are battling to save lives on daily basis," Data said.

Dr Kristian Olson, the director of CAMTech in Boston, US, said the participants also identified clinical challenges related to new born and maternal health, formed multi-disciplinary teams, prototype solutions and developed business models before presenting their ideas to a panel of judges.

With support from Massachusetts General Hospital Global Health, the US, the participants visited Mbarara Hospital, Ishaka Adventist Hospital, Holy Innocents Children's Hospital and Jitojo Hospital, where they learned from healthcare workers about the challenges they face in delivering neonatal and maternal healthcare services.

"CAMTech is a global network of academic, corporate and implementation partners whose mission is to build entrepreneurial capacity and accelerate medical technology innovation to improve the health outcomes in a low and middle setting in Uganda. Our health outcomes are still far from the ideal. It is through such innovations that we can develop sustainable solutions that can change lives of even the ordinary Ugandan," he said.

The minister pledged support for the innovators to actualise their ideas to a level where they can be consumed by the communities.

"My ministry and the Government are interested in supporting you. In the coming years, you will see the prototypes from the hackathon being funded," Tumwebaze said.

The vice-chancellor of Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Prof. Celestino Obua, was delighted that innovators had started yielding results.

Obua mentioned Collard Group Limited, which is fully registered and produces Sanidrop, a locally made handsanitiser and Eco Smart Uganda Limited that makes sanitary towels made out of sugarcane bagasse in Uganda as part of the fruits of the hackathon.

"Parents get excited to see their children grow. We are also happy to see young people who walked in our lab now making remarkable products born out of CAMTech," he said.

He said as Uganda gears to become a middle income country by 2020, it is important to appreciate the role of science and technology in transforming Ugandans into a knowledgeable economy.

He also emphasised the role of intellectual property rights such as patents utility models and industrial designs in promoting innovation. He, however, said the team is also working with Uganda Registration Services Bureau (URSB) to file for a patent.

"You have already obtained intellectual property (IP) rights to your innovations such as the augmented infant resuscitator. IP provides incentives to innovators that are best harnessed in planned systems, your innovation ecosystem in Mbarara University has made a mark in this already and must be supported," he said.