Involve local community in health sector, ministry told

By Hope Mafaranga

The health ministry should involve communities in new technology and innovations in order to find lasting solutions to health challenges. The call was made by Innocent Twinomugisha, a Village Health Team (VHT) member during the sixth annual meeting of the Consortium for Affordable Medical Technologies (CAMTech), Uganda, Medtech Hack-a-thon at Oxford Hall in Mbarara on Friday.

This year’s Hack-a-thon is organised by Mbarara University (MUST) in collaboration with Massachusetts General Hospital in the US. The annual Hack-a-thon brings together clinicians, engineers and entrepreneurs to develop innovative medical technologies. Twinomugisha said VHTs have been significant in mobilising masses for government health programmes such as immunisation and management of HIV.

Challenges
Jonathan Ochan, the co-ordinator of Bugoye sub-county VHT, said they face challenges of handling patients without protective gear, absenteeism of health workers and drug stock-outs. “For what reason should I refer a patient to a health facility knowing full well that there are no drugs or health workers? But what the health ministry is doing is blaming VHTs for not referring patients,” he said.

The VHTs said they play a significant role in improving the health of the locals; but unfortunately, they are working on voluntary basis, yet the community looks up to them to find solutions to their health challenges.

However, Prof. Edgar Mulogo, the head of the community health department at MUST, said this year’s participants will work around the clock to identify pressing clinical and public health challenges. He added that Uganda has the capacity to solve health challenges if the sector is well-facilitated.

“Finding solutions
Dr. Richard Okwii, from the health ministry, said: “We have been used to doctors writing things on paper, forgetting that community’s participation is key in solving most of the health challenges in Uganda.”

Okwii called on health workers to always simplify medical terminology so that people understand it. “It does not make sense if health workers are not communicating with their patients. This intensifies health challenges,” he said.

Okwii decried the long queues at health facilities, which he said discourage people from seeking better health services and this has an implication on maternal health and HIV management.

Okwii, however, said the community has participated in solving health problems as some landlords have donated land to health facilities.

Dr. Santorino Data, the CAMTech Uganda country manager, said their approach enables co-creation where innovators across public health, engineering and business engage with end-users in low and middle-income countries.

Data said since 2012, CAMTech has brought together over 2,500 innovators from more than 500 clinical, academic and commercial organisations to participate in medtech hack-a-thons.