

Three jailed for skipping drugs lead war on TB

Public Health Act gives magistrates power to isolate people suffering from infectious disease until they recover

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They made headlines last year when they were jailed for failing to complete tuberculosis treatment. Now they are the chief campaigners in a bid to prevent default in TB treatment.

Indeed, according to the Public Health Act, a magistrate has the power to send a person suffering from an infectious disease to a place of isolation and be detained until he or she is free from infection or until the magistrate cancels the order.

So why did the two brothers and a third relative default?

Patrick Kipng'etich, 28, attributed his failure to swallow the drugs to lack of food. "I was very weak and that is why I could not complete the drugs," he said.

But the Nandi magistrate didn't buy that, and sentenced him last August, to start an eight month confinement period, and to avoid mingling with other prisoners. The two were jailed last August 14, and released on October 30.

On Wednesday, Mr Kipng'etich told the *Nation*: "At the prison, we were confined in a room and had to take drugs on time."

He spent only two months though, after health organisations protested and he was released from prison.

Mr Daniel Ng'etich, 38, blamed poor information for making him not complete his dosage.

"I did not get proper instruction from the physician, so I did not take the drugs seriously," he said.

He defaulted for one month, he added, before the Provincial Administration and public health officers came knocking on his door.

He was in jail for two months before he was released alongside his brother.

Monitor progress

A community health worker was assigned to them upon their release, to monitor their progress. Both are staying with their families in the area, but are careful not to infect them with the TB virus.

Their other relative, 40-year-old Henry Tirop Ng'etich, 40, escaped jail however, and was admitted to hospital instead.

"When you take the drugs, you need food and due to lack of food I could feel dizzy. That is how I decided to skip taking the drugs," Mr Ng'etich said at Iruru Village in Kapsabet on World TB Day on Wednesday.

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Nelson Otuoma at a TB workshop in Kapsabet



JARED NYATAYA | NATION

From left: Brothers Patrick Kipng'etich, 28, and Daniel Ng'etich, 38, and a close relative Henry Tirop Ng'etich, 40, at their home in Iruru Village, Kapsabet, on World TB Day marked on Wednesday.

One day while lying in his house, the local Provincial Administration and public health officer came for him.

"They asked us to accompany them to Kapsabet Hospital, where we were asked why we were not taking our drugs, before being taken to the police station," Mr Ng'etich said.

He says he is still taking his drugs, and within two weeks he will complete his dose.

Mr Ng'etich also lamented that lack of information was to blame. "I just thought that they were ordinary drugs."

He says they have now been educated on the need to ensure they take the drugs, but added that many people were still unaware of the need to stick to the drugs schedule.

"At the moment, we have taken the initiative to educate people on the dangers of TB and need to seek medication on time and promptly," Mr Ng'etich added.

On Wednesday they joined Kapsabet

residents at a workshop on effective management of tuberculosis.

Area TB co-ordinator Ramadhan Tarus said: "TB patients must be responsible so they do not infect others. We are not going to isolate them any more, though."

And the coordinator of the National Empowerment Network of People Living with HIV/Aids in Kenya, Mr Nelson Otwoma, said that the government should declare TB a national disaster and intensify civic education so that patients could take their drugs without fear of arrest.

"You cannot imprison all people who default. What is required is civic education," Mr Otwoma said.

He asked Kenyans who are infected with TB to seek treatment.

But Kapsabet senior resident magistrate Lorot Abdul defended the jail term saying courts had a duty to protect Kenyans, adding that no one's rights should infringe other people's rights.

Q AND A

Cough, talk or spittle can cause it

Question: What is TB?

Answer: Tuberculosis (TB) is a contagious lung disease that spreads through the air.

When people with the disease cough, sneeze, talk or spit, they propel TB germs, known as bacilli, into the air.

Only a small number of the bacilli need to be inhaled to cause an infection. However, not all people infected with TB bacilli will become sick. The immune system either kills the germs, or "walls off" the TB bacilli where they can lie dormant for years.

Failure of the immune system to control infection with TB bacilli leads to active disease, when TB bacilli multiply and cause damage in the body. Left untreated, each person with infectious TB will spread the germs to about 10 to 15 people every year.