

# Grief and loss are illuminating when they are not so blinding

**A**unt Ruth stood no chance. In her late 70s, possibly early 80s, her health had gradually slipped into worse poverty than her surroundings in a squalid and neglected village deep in wretched Busoga. Her death in early October was, in a way, not entirely unexpected.

Neither, one might argue, was that of her younger sister, Tabitha, who collapsed 40 days later, on the eve of Aunt Ruth's last funeral rites ceremonies. The diagnosis from first responders – well-meaning relations with big hearts but zero medical training – was that Aunt Tabitha was just overwhelmed by the occasion and would soon come to.

Like her sister, her health had been ebbing each year. A few months earlier, tired of being pricked and probed by gloved hands in Kampala, she'd successfully made enough of a fuss to be returned to the village.

When a medical opinion was eventually delivered, the problem was rendered as malaria, ulcers, and high blood pressure – the omnipresent cocktail of pain for the poor. Doctors in a hospital in Kamuli were none the wiser, especially without so much as a working X-ray. So, she was sent down the line to Jinja Regional Referral Hospital, where it was determined that a lateral stroke was to blame.

At this point, with Aunt Tabitha barely hanging on for dear life, this was more for noting than for action. If only she'd been attended to by a medical doctor in the first 15 or so minutes, maybe...

We heard the same words and sentiments a couple of days later when Rosemary, a beloved mother, friend and mother-in-law, keeled

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**Daniel K. Kalinaki**  
**In My View**



over in her home. Being closer to the city and possessed of more means, she made it to a nearby private hospital, but she was out of time. If only she'd been attended to by a medical doctor in the first 15 or so minutes, maybe...

Uncle Sebastian, on the other hand, had much better odds. As soon as he felt unwell, he was taken to a small private hospital in the city where treatment for malaria was initiated. No one thought much of it, even to visit. In any case, we were seeing off Aunt Tabitha, who, polite to a fault until the very end, had patiently and respectfully waited for us to bury Ma Rosemary before following her sister, Ruth, to the land of their ancestors.

While the odds were in Uncle Sebastian's favour, the gods were not, however. The malaria treatment (maltreatment or an administered overdose, some said) led to or accentuated a kidney injury. Fluids were introduced to wash out the drugs, but the kidneys struggled to remove them.

What had been an open-and-shut malaria case now turned into a battle to save the kidneys. The battle had shifted to a private hospital with one of the best kidney specialists in the country, while efforts were made, more out of hope than expectation, to medivac the patient to Aga Khan, Uganda's national referral hospital in Nairobi, Kenya.

Later, at the funeral, we heard from those who had nursed Uncle Sebastian and those who had been present in his final hour when, after a dialysis procedure, his heart had given up the fight and killed him a day before his 75th birthday.

We heard questions about the malaria treatment that had sparked it off, the fluid regimen that had flooded his chest and organs, and the final decision to turn to dialysis. Who or what was to blame? Could it have been prevented? Was it a case of negligence or our human instinct to find some emotional guardrail to hang onto?

We shall never know. Grief can blind you as much as it can reveal life in all its realities and ironies. As I stood in the small parking lot of the private hospital watching, yet again, the funeral directors pull another shift, the darkness of night wrapping us all in gloom, I could just make out in the distance the lights of the national referral hospital, Mulago. I wondered, then and now, if it would have felt easier – more acceptable – if he had died in our best hospital. I'll never know.

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