

Dental care still too expensive for the ordinary Ugandan

By the age of 50, many Ugandans have already lost several teeth, not because of poor habits, but because proper dental treatment is simply unaffordable.

Last week, I visited a dentist for a root canal treatment, a procedure that cost me Shs350,000. As I walked out of the clinic, a hawker selling roasted groundnuts passed by. Out of kindness, I offered him Shs1,000 for his hard work. But that brief moment triggered a deeper reflection:

If this hawker had the same dental problem I had, would he ever afford the treatment?

The honest answer is no—and so is the case for many Ugandans.

Dental care in Uganda remains one of the most neglected and expensive components of our health system. Many people continue to opt for tooth removal instead of procedures that could save their teeth simply because they cannot afford them. The difference between a tooth extraction at Shs35,000–60,000 in some lower-level facilities and a root canal or nerve extraction costing Shs300,000 and above is too wide for ordinary citizens to bridge.

Poor oral health affects more than just the mouth. Dental infections can lead to complications such as heart disease, diabetes flare-ups, poor nutrition, and chronic pain. Children miss school; adults miss work. A small

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untreated tooth problem quickly becomes a disease burden for the household and the nation.

Yet oral health barely receives attention in national planning. Many public facilities do not have functioning dental units, and where they exist, they are understaffed, under-equipped, or frequently out of service.

As a country, we cannot keep pouring billions into large, politically driven health projects like the infamous Lubowa specialised hospital whose completion remains uncertain years later. Meanwhile, the everyday health needs of ordinary Ugandans go unmet.

Instead of investing in mega-projects that benefit only a few, Uganda should channel

resources into strengthening other departments like dental care at health centre IV level across the country.

Health Centre IVs serve large catchment areas, meaning dental services would be closer to communities. Costs would reduce significantly if services are subsidised through government support.

Early intervention would prevent severe infections and reduce overcrowding in regional hospitals.

It would reduce catastrophic household spending on dental emergencies.

More jobs would be created for dental officers and oral health specialists.

Just as we have subsidised vaccinations, HIV treatment, and maternal health services, the Ministry of Health should consider subsidising essential dental procedures. Root canals, fillings, and routine check-ups should not be luxuries; they should be accessible, affordable, and available at nearby public facilities.

The hawker I met reminded me of the real Uganda, the hardworking citizens who contribute to the economy daily but cannot afford basic healthcare. Dental care should not be a privilege reserved for a few. If we truly want a healthy nation, the government must rethink its priorities and bring essential dental services closer to the people. Ugandans deserve preventive and restorative dental care, not just extraction after extraction.

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