

## 2025 in Review

# Innovations, deals and disease outbreaks that shaped 2025

Besides medical advancements in controlling and preventing malaria and HIV, Uganda also succeeded in managing the spread of Ebola, with 14 confirmed cases and four deaths recorded.

BY TONNY ABET

Last year, Uganda's health sector was defined by rapid responses to crises, groundbreaking innovations and the commissioning of more than 300 new and renovated health centres. There were also concerns around transparency in the sector, as well as the health-data sharing pact Uganda signed with the US government.

The year began with the country's eighth Ebola outbreak, triggered by the Sudan strain and first confirmed in a nurse at Mulago hospital on January 30.

Despite spreading to other people, swift action led to 14 cases and four deaths before Health minister Dr Jane Ruth Aceng declared it over in April, in a ceremony held in Mbale. The deaths include two confirmed cases and two probable ones, with 10 people recovering from Ebola.

"Having completed two full incubation cycles, that is 42 days, since the last confirmed case was discharged on March 14, 2025, and having recorded no new cases amidst sustained surveillance efforts, I now officially declare the current Sudan Ebola virus disease outbreak in Uganda to be over," Dr Aceng said on April 26 last year.

The outbreak was first confirmed following laboratory testing of samples obtained from a 32-year-old male nurse, who died at Mulago National Referral Hospital. The case had been managed at several facilities, including Mulago in Kampala, Matugga in Wakiso, Mbale Regional Referral Hospital in Mbale City and by a traditional healer.

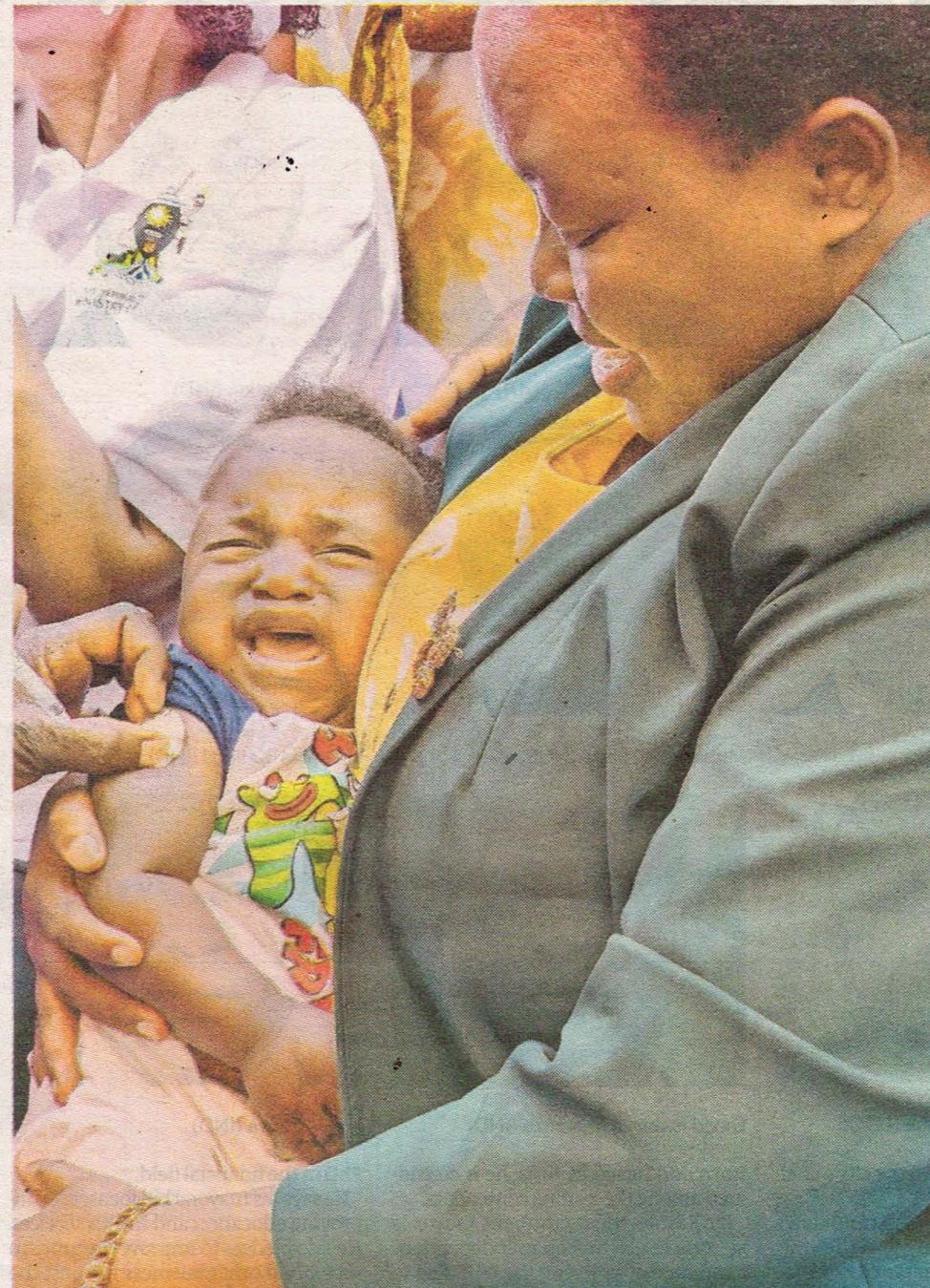
### Malaria vaccine amid hesitancy

In the same month of April, malaria control also saw historic advances, with the national rollout of the R21 vaccine launched in the high-burden Apac District. Ms Robinah Nabbanja, the Prime Minister, represented President Museveni during the launch.

In his speech read by Ms Nabbanja, the President noted that malaria had been one of the biggest nightmares of the country, with children most affected.

"Malaria has been one of Uganda's biggest health challenges, accounting for nearly 30 percent of outpatient visits and 20 percent of hospital deaths, with our children under five years bearing the greatest burden," Mr Museveni noted.

He added: "This vaccine, which has been proven to significantly reduce severe malaria cases and hospitalisation, is a game-changer. This vaccine must be used with our existing preventive measures such as mosquito nets, indoor re-



Prime minister Robinah Nabbanja (right) holds a baby during the launch of the malaria vaccination campaign in Apac District in April. PHOTO/TONNY ABET

sidual spraying and prompt treatment of a fever within 24 hours. It will accelerate our journey towards a malaria-free Uganda."

Six months later, the ministry reported a mixed bag of results for the four-dose vaccine, specifically regarding the uptake. The uptake of the second and third doses has remained suboptimal, with the ministry blaming it on vaccine hesitancy and misinformation.

Dr Myers Lugemwa, the head of the malaria control programme at the ministry, said the low turnout for the vaccine was due to the lack of knowledge by the parents, who expressed biases about receiving the vaccine.

"When we started off in April, we almost scored 80 percent of the targeted population for the first dose, the second dose was in May, at 60 percent, while the third dose is coming low compared to what was expected because having started with 80 percent, we should have maintained with other doses," he said.

Dr Lugemwa further noted that the uptake of the vaccine in some districts in North Buganda and sub-regions of Busoga and Acholi, was below 30 percent despite them recording high malaria deaths.

### UGANDA-US HEALTH DEAL

In the MoU, the US government requires Uganda to contribute \$500m (Shs1.8 trillion) over the next five years, starting from FY2025/2026. The US government will provide \$1.7 billion (Shs6.2 trillion) of the total \$2.3 billion (Shs8.28 trillion) in the five-year deal signed on December 10, 2025.

### Improving access to care

In April, Premier Nabbanja did more than launch the malaria vaccination. She also commissioned 398 health centres, which were newly constructed or renovated by the government through the multi-billion shillings Uganda Intergovernmental Fiscal Transfers Programme Project for Uganda (UgIFT) and Uganda Maternal and Child Health Improvement Project (UMCHIP).

"These HCIIIs have modern equipment. Please take these health facilities as very important facilities. Here, we have highly trained and qualified personnel. Make sure you deliver before a qualified midwife," she stated.

### Addressing high HIV infections

HIV is one of the burdening sexually transmitted infections, but a new drug, lenacapavir, tested in Uganda and South Africa, has proven to be over 99 percent effective in preventing the acquisition of new infection.

Despite this success reported at the end of 2024, plans for a massive rollout were hard because of the high cost, \$28,000 (Shs100.1m) per person per year, but this year, a new announcement of 99 percent price decline changed the mood into action mode.

The Gates Foundation, in September, announced a partnership with Indian manufacturer Hetero Labs (Hetero) to make the generic version of lenacapavir, the world's first twice-yearly injectable drug for HIV prevention, at a significantly low cost.

In a statement, the Foundation said Hetero Labs will manufacture the drug at "roughly \$40 (about Shs144,000) per patient per year (after a short pre-treatment oral regimen)," following upfront funding and volume guarantees.

This development followed a 2024 move by Gilead Sciences, the develop-

er of lenacapavir, to grant royalty-free licenses for lenacapavir production to six generic manufacturers for 120 low- and middle-income countries.

Lenacapavir is due to be rolled out as early as the end of this year, but the generic version is expected to be available in 2027 across 120 low- and middle-income countries.

Uganda, according to officials from the ministry, will receive a few doses from the Global Fund (36,000 doses), and the US has also promised to bring some doses. But the government has not yet come out clearly on the doses it will buy on its own. Uganda registers about 37,000 new HIV infections annually, crippling the drive to end the disease as a public health threat by 2030.

### Health deals, funding

Amid this, the discussion on the heavy reliance of our healthcare sector on donors and foreign countries has increased.

This partly increased because of the move by the US government, in the middle of last year, to dismantle the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the introduction of the America First Global Health Strategy, which, in addition to promising funds of more than \$1.7b (Shs6.2 trillion) over the next five years, also obligated Uganda to share its vital health data.

USAID had been supporting the health sector by supporting placement of health workers in Ugandan health facilities, which remain largely understaffed; supporting community health interventions and bridging gaps in drug distribution and supply.

Before the government signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the US government on December 10, 2025.

Ugandan lawyers, basing on the interest of the US government expressed in the draft MoU, warned that the agreement could hand the US government unchecked access to sensitive health records, side-lining Uganda's own regulators and laws.

The lawyers said there are concerns around the risk of losing data sovereignty, privacy violations and legal clashes.

Mr Gilbert Ssettuma, a legal officer at the government's Personal Data Protection Office (PDPO), also noted that the deal demands "real-time access to our health information systems," yet it ignores Uganda's new Digital Health Guidelines, released in September by the ministry.

But Uganda's Health ministry clarified after the signing of the MoU, that data will be shared in compliance with national laws, with only aggregate data provided to the US Congress for planning and oversight.

But the final agreement was not made public for those with concerns to read.

Before this MoU with the US government was signed, Parliament approved a supplementary budget request from the government for Shs397 billion for the health sector. This was part of the Shs8.1 trillion, which the government had requested.

Finance minister Matia Kasaija, in June, during the Budget speech, announced that the budget for the health sector has been significantly increased in the Financial Year (FY) 2025/2026 to Shs5.8 trillion, up from Shs2.9 trillion in FY2024/2025.

This improvement in figures is better celebrated in the new financial year, when Ugandans know the total amount of the promised money which has been released by the government to the health sector.