

THE SCREAM

It was late in the evening, and we were preparing to go to bed when we heard a high-pitched scream. Robbie, my wife, shouted from the bedroom, 'Ian, did you hear that?'

'Yes, I did,' I replied, 'let me investigate.'

It sounded as if a woman was being beaten or raped and I was a little apprehensive. I asked the guard which direction the scream had come from, and he directed me up the hill. As we climbed the hill, we found some people, including the girl who had screamed.

It quickly became evident that there had been no foul play, but one woman was holding a baby who was limp and was having difficulty breathing, and the mother of the baby had screamed because she thought the baby was going to die. The onlookers told me that they had called for a bodaboda and were going to take the baby to a clinic in Namuwongo.

'You should take him to a big hospital,' I advised and then realised that I was the founder of just such a hospital, and I had the power to help these people. 'Wait a minute,' I said and ran back to the house to get my car. The mother was still in a state of shock, but her friend held the baby, and we set off for International Hospital Kampala.

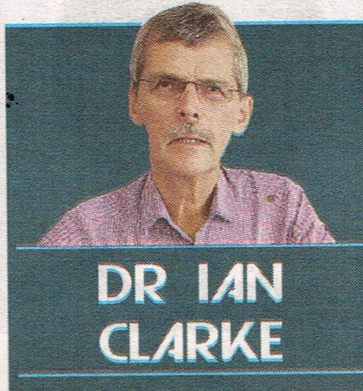
When we arrived, it was after 10:00pm and the hospital was not

busy, so I rushed the baby into the triage room where the nurse took the temperature which was 39 degrees. Such a high temperature could cause the baby to fit unless it was lowered quickly, so the nurse gave a suppository of paracetamol.

At this point, the baby regained consciousness and started howling – which was a good sign. There was a paediatrician on call who saw the child immediately, so having satisfied myself that the baby would be well cared for, I assured the mother that I would take care of the bill and left the now tearful mother and baby at the hospital.

The following morning, I visited to find that baby Aaron was doing much better, and the cause of the high fever had been a middle ear infection that was being treated. Now mum was smiling, assured that her baby would be fine, while Aaron was looking at me with some degree of suspicion.

I suspect he was thinking – so you are the one responsible for sticking something up my backside, and for these people poking and pricking me. It is a natural instinct to be careful when we hear screaming, in case we stumble



DR IAN CLARKE

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into something that also harms us. The usual advice is not to get involved, but I had to see what was happening because the scream was so piercing. It was that scream that ended up saving the baby's life because if his mum had not screamed, I would not have known there was a sick baby right outside my gate. The scream itself was not a call for help, but this mum had seen enough in her young life to know that if her baby was unconscious and was having difficulty breathing, there was a high chance he would die. It was not a scream for help; it was a scream of despair.

In this case, the story had a good outcome since I was able to play the role of the Good Samaritan, but in most cases there is no such person

to help. From a medical standpoint, Uganda is divided into those who are able to get help when they need it because they have money or medical insurance, and those who get pushed over the edge by any small medical emergency. How many times have I heard about someone who has lost a child and when I inquire as to the cause, I am told that he just developed a fever and died.

The parents usually have a sense of resignation about the loss. That was why the scream was a scream of despair; that young mother knew she would lose her baby because she had seen it before and she knew how things played out for a person like her who lived on the edge.