

Embrace autism with compassion, action

WHEN Kulusum Naigaga's son, Aizat, was diagnosed with autism, she chose resilience over resignation. Today, Aizat thrives in a mainstream school, a testament to Naigaga's relentless advocacy and the power of early intervention. However, Aizat's journey remains an exception in a country where autism faces stigma, myths and neglect. It is time for Uganda to confront this crisis head-on, starting with a national campaign to debunk myths about autism. This drive should be led by the health ministry.

Autism is a neuro-developmental condition that affects social communication, behaviour and sensory processing, with varying symptoms, including restricted interests and repetitive behaviour, challenges in verbal and non-verbal communication. Contrary to linking it to witchcraft or curses, autism is rooted in genetic and environmental factors, with the global prevalence estimated at 1%, according to the World Health Organisation. In Uganda, the rates are rising, yet many families remain in denial, fearing stigma and face challenges, including late diagnosis, inadequate support and societal exclusion. Parents often hide their children, fearing judgment, as schools and communities



EDITORIAL

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remain ignorant. Even after being diagnosed, children have limited access to specialised care, therapies and inclusive education. Many families also face challenges because the

health system struggles with a few trained professionals.

Therefore, the Government needs to spearhead an awareness campaign through partnering with schools, religious leaders and non-governmental organisations to debunk the myths; scaling up programmes to equip paediatricians and psychologists to diagnose autism early and provide evidence-based guidance.

The setting up of parent support networks and resource centres – offering practical advice on therapies, schooling and daily care – will go a long way in mitigating the trauma that comes with having autistic children.

The Government, through the education ministry, should not leave the learning of autistic children in only private entities' hands. It should train teachers and set up special schools for autistic children.

When parents seek early intervention and advocate for their children, they can unlock the children's potential. When the Government allocates resources to special schools, funds research and integrates autism into national health policies, no child will be left behind.