

MULAGO SURGEONS SEPARATE PARASITIC TWINS

By Agnes Kyatalengerire

Twenty-one-year-old Racheal Nantongo, a resident of Bweyogere in Wakiso district, says she carried her first pregnancy without any major complications. During routine antenatal visits, ultrasound scans indicated that she was carrying one baby, although doctors noted an abnormal opening on the baby's back, a finding she did not initially take seriously.

At eight months pregnant, Nantongo travelled to Jinja district to prepare for delivery under the care of her mother-in-law. However, two weeks before her expected delivery date of January 13, she developed intense labour pains and was rushed to Jinja Regional Referral Hospital, where doctors performed a Caesarean section.

After delivery, Nantongo was shocked to see an unusual lifeless growth attached to her baby's back, with the doctors concluding that these were parasitic twins.

"I was frightened, but the health workers counselled and encouraged me to remain strong and accept my baby as she is," Nantongo said.

She was referred to Mulago National Referral Hospital on Saturday.

Luckily, a team of paediatric



Nantongo attending to her baby at the recovery ward after the surgery

surgeons at Mulago have successfully separated the parasitic twins after three hours of intense surgery (including time to administer anaesthesia).

The hospital director, Dr Rosemary Byanyima, said the intense surgery to separate the normal from the demised twin was successfully conducted on Monday.

"We had to quickly make sure we separate the demised twin who was not well-formed from the viable one," she said.

PARASITIC TWINS

Parasitic twins, also called

HOW PARASITIC TWINS COME ABOUT

The head of paediatric surgeons at Mulago Hospital, Dr Stella Nimanya, noted that parasitic twins occur from an incomplete separation of a fertilised egg, resulting in one dominant normal fetus (autosite) and a vestigial underdeveloped twin (parasite) that relies on the host twin for blood supply and nourishment. It appears as extra limbs or body parts attached to the healthy twin. This situation is explained by either a failed split (fission) or a later fusion and incomplete absorption of the other twin during early pregnancy.

Nimanya cited vascular accident, where the blood supply is cut off, among the causes.

heteropagus twins, are a rare form of conjoined twinning where one foetus (the parasite) is severely underdeveloped and depends on the cardiovascular system of the

other (the autosite).

The cardiovascular system, also called the circulatory system, is the body's transport network, consisting of the heart, blood vessels (arteries, veins, capillaries) and blood, which are responsible for delivering oxygen and nutrients to cells, while removing waste such as carbon dioxide, ensuring overall body health. At some point, the parasitic baby stops forming and growing.

Globally, heteropagus twins are extremely rare, with an estimated incidence of one per one million live births.

PAEDIATRICIAN SPEAKS OUT

The head of paediatric surgeons at Mulago Hospital, Dr Stella Nimanya, said upon clinical examination, it was discovered that the twins had been joined at the lower back or at the buttocks (also medically termed as pyopagus), affecting the rectum where the dependent twin was passing stool.

This simply means that the hands, legs and the genitalia of the parasitic baby girl (the other twin who had stopped growing) were all joined at the back and the rectum of the normal baby.

Nimanya said prior to the surgery, several investigations, which included CT scans and blood tests, were done.

She confirmed that the

dependent twin was in a stable condition after the surgery.

"The baby is doing well, breastfeeding and passing stool properly," she said.

Although the surgery was not complicated, Nimanya described it as very sensitive and a rare case.

Following the operation, Nantongo expressed relief that her baby is recovering well. She said she never anticipated the intervention.

PREVIOUS CASES

This is not the first such surgery. Since 2012, Mulago surgeons have separated eight sets of parasitic twins.

A notable case in Bugiri district involved a baby boy born with four legs and four arms in 2014. The parasite, which was headless and heartless, was successfully removed at Mulago Hospital at three months of age by a team led by Dr John Sekabira.

Other hospitals have managed to perform similar surgeries in the past. In 2022, a 20-year-old mother gave birth to twins joined at the abdomen, which were successfully separated in an eight-hour surgery at Mbarara Regional Referral Hospital.

In 2021, doctors at Soroti Regional Referral Hospital also separated conjoined twins five days after birth, where one twin was a dead foetus.