

WHY ANTENATAL ULTRASOUND SCANS REMAIN OUT OF REACH

By Ibrahim Ruhweza

Rose Namukose, 35, is a mother of three and now eight months pregnant. She walks slowly inside the dusty gate of Busesa Mixed Primary School in Bugweri district, one hand pressed against her lower back, the other steadying the weight of her belly.

Each step looks measured, careful, as if she is negotiating with her own body to keep moving. The sun hits high and unforgivingly and, sweat darkens the fabric of her flowery green dress, clinging to her skin.

Her breathing is heavy, uneven and she pauses often, not to rest fully, but to gather enough strength to take the next few steps.

Her eyes are filled with exhaustion, fixed on the ground ahead rather than the distance she still has to cover. There is quiet unhappiness, the kind that comes from knowing this journey is necessary, but tedious.

THE ONLY ULTRASOUND SCAN

On a Saturday mid-morning, Namukose is among the pregnant women who have turned up for a medical camp organised by the Rotary Club of Kampala South at Busesa Mixed Primary School in Bugweri.

The only ultrasound scan in Bugweri is at Busesa Health Centre IV, which is 15km away from her home in Buyanga village, Busesa sub-county.

After medics at the camp subjected her to a scan, she got shocking information: For the last eight months of her pregnancy, Namukose did not know she was carrying twins because she had never had an ultrasound scan.

"I thought I was seven months pregnant, but nurses have told me that I am eight months pregnant. I had no idea," she said, wearing a worried face. Namukose is worried because she believes looking after twins is more demanding.

"I had not even prepared enough to give birth to two babies. My husband is also not financially stable. I wonder how we shall manage the twins," she said.

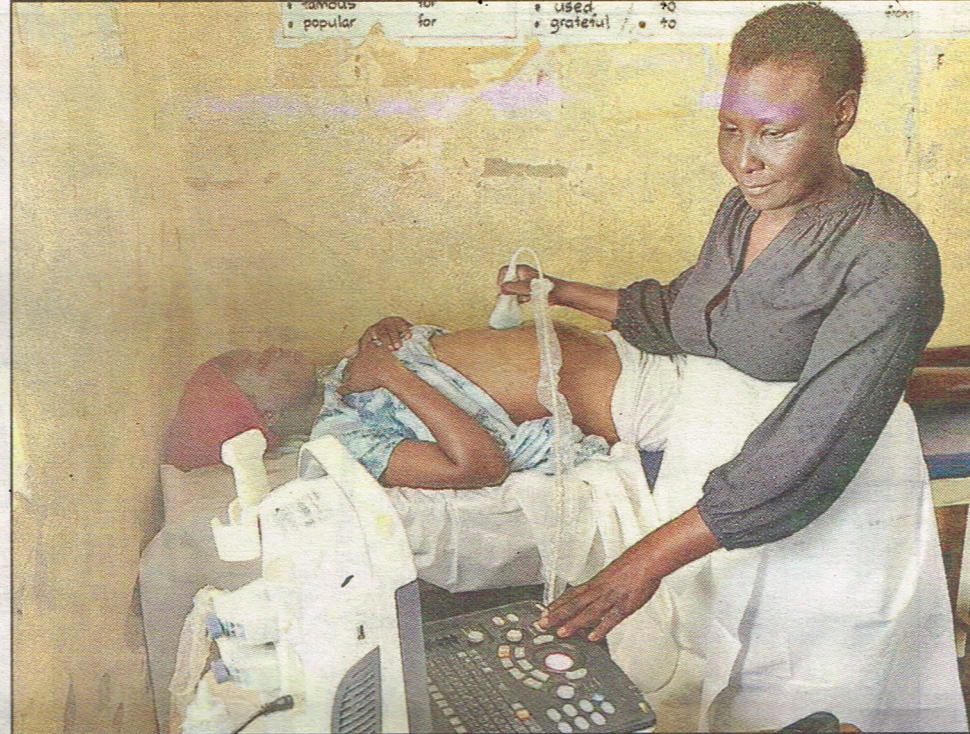
NEVER HAD A SCAN

Namukose recalled that when she gave birth to her first child, she never had a scan. "At the time of giving birth, the medics revealed that the baby was too big. In the process of pushing, I had a tear."

Namukose says the tear recurs every time she gives birth. Namukose is among the hundreds of women in

INADEQUATE HEALTHCARE FOR PREGNANT MOTHERS IN BUGIRI

PHOTO BY IBRAHIM RUHWEZA



A sonographer attending to a pregnant woman during medical camp organised by the Rotary Club of Kampala South at Busesa Mixed Primary School in Bugweri

Bugweri, who complete the pregnancy cycle without going for an ultrasound scan to check the state of their pregnancies due to the lack of a scanning machine.

SCAN RELEVANCY

Her story is similar to that of Habibah Namunana, 21, another resident of Buyanga village, who is six months pregnant. She said for six months of her pregnancy, it was her first experience to undergo an ultrasound scan.

Experts say that ultrasound scans are an important part of prenatal care and are considered safe for both the mother and the baby.

An ultrasound scan helps doctors monitor the baby's development and identify potential challenges early.

The number of scans a pregnant woman needs depends on whether the pregnancy is low-risk or high-risk and on medical guidance.

ECHO NURSE'S PERSPECTIVE

Jane-Liz Nambogo, an echo nurse working with Samaritan Home Health, said under a normal low-risk pregnancy, most health guidelines recommend at least two ultrasound scans.

She said the first scan is usually done between eight and 14 weeks of pregnancy.

"This scan confirms the pregnancy, estimates the due date, checks the baby's heartbeat and determines whether there is more than one baby," she explained.

According to Nambogo, the second scan, often called the anomaly scan, is done between 18 and 22 weeks of pregnancy.

"This scan examines the baby's organs and overall development, checks the position of the placenta, and looks for any structural abnormalities."

HIGH-RISK

Nambogo said additional ultrasound scans may be required if the pregnancy is considered high-risk. This, she noted, can include cases where the mother has medical conditions, such as high blood pressure or diabetes, is carrying twins, experiences bleeding or pain, or if there are concerns about the baby's



Rose Namukose, 35, a mother of three, now eight months pregnant. This was during a medical camp organised by the Rotary Club of Kampala South at Busesa Mixed Primary School in Bugweri

growth or position.

"Some doctors also recommend a third-trimester scan between 32 and 36 weeks to assess the baby's growth and position before delivery," Nambogo said.

Overall, Nambogo said ultrasound scans are necessary because they help to ensure

the health and safety of both the mother and the baby throughout pregnancy.

During the free medical camp, the antenatal department was overworked, as 118 pregnant mothers turned up among the over 1,000 patients who came for medical attention at the camp.

RURAL MOTHERS CAN'T AFFORD

Nambogo said an ultrasound in rural communities can cost a minimum of sh35,000, an amount she said is too much for most of the village folks.

Nathan Munyirwa, the in-charge of Hope Children's clinic in Bugweri, said health facilities are too far from residents' homes, which discourages pregnant women from going for scans.

Munyirwa said the ultrasound is important because it can help doctors and mothers to know if the pregnancy is ectopic (when fertilisation takes place outside the uterus, usually in the fallopian tube).

ROTARY COMMENTS

Emmanuel Mukwenda Mugisha, the project co-ordinator of Rotary Club of Kampala South, said a big number of people who attended the medical camp not only came for an ultrasound, but also for other services like eye and dental checkups.

He observed that the need for medical services was far beyond what they delivered.

Geoffrey Martin Kitakule, the Rotary Governor of District 9213, which takes a big part of Uganda, said ultrasound scan

PERSONNEL GAPS

Jane-Liz Nambogo, an echo nurse working with Samaritan Home Health, said at least each Health Centre III should have a sonographer to check whether pregnant mothers are in good condition.

However, the Government deploys sonographers starting at Health Centres IVs. The whole district of Bugweri has only one Health Centre IV in Busesa, with one sonographer.

According to the 2024 Uganda National Population and Housing Census, Bugweri has a total population of 211,511 people. Of these, 99,283 are males, while and 112,228 are females.

"Some districts with one Health Centre IV have thousands of mothers who, at times, do not get the ultrasound scan services," Nambogo said.

With long queues at Busesa Health Centre IV, mothers can only access scans from private facilities, at a fee.

services are quite rare in rural communities, adding that even the available health centres are not enough to serve all the people. He said the medical camp organised by Rotarians was magical and timely.

"As you can see, the other side of the antenatal care has got an overwhelming number of pregnant mothers eager to get service," he said, adding: "We have given them mama kits, which they will use during delivery. This is just the start."

He commended the Government for creating an enabling environment for Rotarians to reach all the needy, but insisted that the need is still too much.

HEALTH MINISTRY RESPONSE

When contacted, health minister Dr Jane Ruth Aceng said government has plans to equip all health centres countrywide with ultrasound scans.

"We have plans in the near future to see all health centres in the country have more than one ultrasound scan," Aceng said, although she did not specify when they would be procured and delivered.