

Portable ultrasound machine gives mothers hope

KALANGALA. Medics advise every pregnant woman to undergo at least two ultrasound scans at five months and another at nine months, to monitor and assess the health and safety of the expecting mother and unborn baby.

However, several mothers, especially in rural settings and hard-to-reach areas, rarely do this, according to Mr Fred Kabanda, the officer-in-charge of Mulabana Health Centre II in Bujjumba Sub-county, Kalangala District.

"It is vital to know if the baby has formed well at five months, and then later to understand its weight, gender. Other checkpoints are ample amniotic fluid, and if there are no complications," he told *Daily Monitor* at the weekend.

According to government policy, scan services are only authorised at Health Centre IV level, making Kalangala Health Centre IV one of only two facilities in the island district permitted to offer the service.

Mr Kabanda said several pregnant women referred for a scan fail to travel due to high transport costs and the long travel inconveniences. When such women report for delivery without scan results, Mr Kabanda said health

workers are left uncertain about the baby's condition.

He warned that failure to make a scan examination can put both the expecting mother and unborn child(ren) at risk, especially in cases where complications such as abnormal placental positioning are involved.

"If we tell a mother to push without knowing what is happening inside, we could end up with a tragedy," Mr Kabanda said.

Mothers speak out

For Ms Honest Katusiime, 27, a resident of Kussu Landing Site in Bufumira Sub-county, the lack of timely access to advanced care proved costly. As such, she lost her twins in 2024.

Ms Jenifer Namulwanyanya from Kalangala Town Council said she usually travels to Masaka District (mainland) for scan services despite the expenses involved.

"I spend over Shs100,000 to and from Masaka for an ultrasound scan at six months and wait to have another at delivery time," she said.

The decision to travel to Masaka was because she did not trust the results of the locally obtained scans.

BETTER DIAGNOSIS

Portable ultrasound devices such as the Butterfly iQ, which use "ultrasound-on-a-chip" technology and connects to smartphones. They are transforming diagnosis in remote areas because within 30 seconds, you can identify a serious problem and arrange a referral. Without the technology, you might miss it.

Hope has, however, emerged following the donation of more than 10 hand-held butterfly ultrasound scanners and three digital stethoscopes by Bridge to Health Global, a Toronto-based non-profit organisation. It was founded in 2013 to provide sustainable medical, dental, and educational services to under-served and hard-to-reach communities in Uganda and Kenya.

Over the years, the organisation has worked closely with local health partners, emphasising capacity building, strengthening maternal and child

health services, and, more recently, integrating digital tools to improve the diagnosis and management of infectious diseases.

Dr Michael Suuna, a medical officer at Bukasa Health Centre IV, Kalangala District, described the acquisition of modern diagnostic tools as critical for improving patient outcomes on the islands.

"These advanced stethoscopes allow us to clearly hear heart, lung, and abdominal sounds that may indicate disease more accurately and faster than normal stethoscopes," he said.

Dr Suuna added: "Artificial intelligence will also assist in diagnosing conditions with precision in a timely manner."

He noted that the portable ultrasound devices are particularly useful in areas with unreliable electricity supply as is in many island health facilities.

Dr Ami Kurzweil, an emergency medicine physician in California and director of ultrasound fellowships at Eisenhower Medical Centre in US, said limited access to imaging services in many African settings forces patients to seek care only when critically ill.

Dr Frank Kisakye, the officer-in-

charge of Kalangala Health Centre IV, said the hand-held devices have simplified their work as he does not have to move a patient across the hospital for imaging.

Despite the technological gains, Kalangala Woman Member of Parliament Helen Nakimuli said the district still faces staffing and infrastructure gaps.

"While we have buildings, we need more health workers," she said, revealing a scanning machine at Bukasa Health Centre IV remains non-functional due to lack of trained personnel.

MP Nakimuli added: "It is senseless for patients to be turned away from nearby facilities due to lack of equipment or staff."

Kalangala comprises 84 islands though 64 are habitable. Of these, only 16 have health facilities ranging from Health Centre II to IV. Residents often travel long distances across water to access services, incurring transport costs and risking delays in emergencies.

Ms Nakimuli urged the government to invest more in diagnostic equipment, recruit trained personnel, and support inter-island transport systems to ensure equitable access to healthcare.