

In the fight against Malaria, everyone can be a hero

Uganda loses more than 15,000 people to malaria every year. Most of them are children, and most of these deaths are preventable. We have fought this disease for generations. Sometimes we have won. Other times we have lost. But one thing remains constant: the fight is won by heroes - and not all heroes wear white coats.

STANDING WITH GIANTS

Today, Ugandan scientists are writing the next chapter of history. At the Uganda Virus Research Institute in Entebbe, Dr. Jonathan Kayondo and his team at Target Malaria Uganda, of which I am a member, are developing genetic technologies that could change how we fight malaria forever. Instead of just killing mosquitoes or blocking their bites, they are asking: what if we could modify mosquitoes so they can't spread malaria at all?

"This isn't foreign science imported from overseas. This is the work of Ugandan researchers," affirms Dr. Kayondo. Our colleague, scientist Krystal Birungi, works with me in Uganda's first advanced insectary, collecting mosquitoes from islands around Lake Victoria, engaging with our communities, and building solutions for our problems.

"In 2024, we successfully began studying genetically modified mosquitoes in a contained insectary right here in Uganda. It's cutting-edge science happening in our own backyard," says Birungi.

Dr Kayondo reminds us that in 1897, Dr. Ronald Ross sat in a cramped Indian laboratory, squinting at mosquitoes under a weak microscope. After months of failures, he finally proved that mosquitoes spread malaria. That discovery opened the door to every malaria control method we use today.

Decades later, Chinese scientist Tu Youyou tested hundreds of traditional remedies during China's Cultural Revolution. Working with basic equipment and limited resources, she discovered artemisinin — the drug that now saves millions of African lives each year. She won a Nobel Prize for it in 2015. These scientists refused to accept that malaria was unstoppable. They were right.

But here's what matters most: while scientists work on tomorrow's breakthroughs, we need heroes today. And that is where you come in.

FIVE-MINUTE HEROISM

You don't need a laboratory or a PhD to save lives. You just need to do these simple things:

- Sleep under a treated net every single night. Check it for holes and replace when it is worn out. Make sure your children and pregnant women in the house use theirs too. No excuses.
- Walk around your compound once a week. Look for standing water - in old tyres, containers, blocked gutters, flowerpots and pour it out. Mosquitoes breed in these places. No water, no mosquitoes.
- Keep your grass cut and your compound clean. Mosquitoes hide in overgrown bushes and rubbish piles. A clean home is a safer home.
- Go to a health facility when you have fever. Don't wait. Don't guess. Don't buy medicine from a shop without testing. Get tested. Start treatment immediately if positive. Finish all the medicine.
- Welcome health workers when they come to spray. When community programmes offer free nets, take them. When health workers educate neighbours, listen and share what you learn. These actions take minutes. But they save lives - maybe your child's, maybe your neighbour's, maybe someone you will never meet. That is heroism.

WE CAN WIN THIS

Let's be honest: the fight is getting harder. Climate change is expanding mosquito breeding zones.

Some malaria parasites are becoming resistant to drugs. The parasite and the mosquitoes keep adapting. But so do we.

We have bed nets that work. We have effective medicines. We have dedicated health workers reaching the remotest villages to treat patients. And now we have Ugandan scientists developing next-generation tools that could finally tip the balance in our favour.

Target Malaria's work is backed by rigorous safety testing, community consent, and government oversight. They are not rushing. They are doing it right. And they are doing it with Uganda's leadership. We should celebrate our scientists and invest in Ugandan research.

But we should not wait for perfect solutions. The child sleeping under a torn net tonight needs action now, just like the family living near a swampy area or the pregnant woman at risk.

THE CHOICE IS SIMPLE

Ronald Ross called malaria "million-murdering Death." He wasn't exaggerating. We know this disease. We've buried too many people because of it. But we also know it can be beaten. The scientists who came before us proved it. Our own scientists are proving it again. And every Ugandan who takes simple prevention steps is proving it every day.

This generation can be the one that finally frees Uganda's children from malaria. But only if we all fight - scientists in labs, health workers in clinics, families in homes.

Check your net tonight. Clear the water containers tomorrow. Support the health workers when they come. Trust our scientists as they develop new tools. Every action counts. Every person matters. In the fight against malaria, everyone can be a hero. Will you?

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