

MOST OF THE AFFECTED CHILDREN ARE AGED TWO TO 10 YEARS

MALARIA FUELLING KIDNEY FAILURE IN CHILDREN

By Violet Nabatanzi

Ugandan children suffering from severe malaria are increasingly developing kidney failure and being admitted to the dialysis unit at Mulago Hospital, health workers have noted.

Moses Odongo, a senior nephrology nursing officer at the hospital, noted that the kidney unit sometimes receives between three and four children with kidney failure in a week. However, the number can sometimes be higher. Most of the affected children are aged two to 10 years.

"These days, we also have several children coming from the children's wards and this is mainly due to malaria. Malaria causes acute kidney failure, but fortunately, these are reversible if dialysis is started early," he said.

Kidney failure, also known as renal failure, is a medical condition in which the kidneys fail to adequately filter waste products from the blood.

Speaking on the sidelines of the Prime Minister Robinah Nabbanja's visit to the hospital during the Women's Day celebrations, Dr Peace Bagasha, a nephrologist, said the children are handled by a paediatric nephrologist.

"They are looked after by a paediatric nephrologist and then come to this unit to undergo dialysis using the adult machines," Bagasha said.

She said the consumables used by children are specifically designed for them, but the machines can be shared by both children and adults. Bagasha added that children usually recover quickly.

During the visit, it was revealed that the hospital recently conducted a kidney transplant on a 16-year-old patient.

Apart from malaria, some children develop kidney failure due to conditions, such as nephritis, which causes inflammation of the kidneys.

Odongo said pregnancy-related complications are also contributing to kidney failure among mothers. Conditions, such as toxemia in pregnancy and HELLP syndrome can lead to kidney failure if not managed early.

However, many expectant mothers are now treated at the dialysis unit in the Mulago Women's Hospital, although some are still referred to the main unit.

STATISTICS

The kidney unit at Mulago Hospital treats about 200 patients with a 25-bed ward dedicated to people with kidney failure.

"The number keeps going up because kidney failure cases are common. Diseases like hypertension and diabetes are increasing and many of them are lifestyle-related," Odongo said.

Last year, health experts estimated that about 900,000 Ugandans suffering



From left: Dr Rosemary Byanyima, Hanifa Kawooya, Prime Minister Robinah Nabbanja, Lucy Nakyobe, Dr Diana Atwine and other officials at Mulago Hospital to mark Women's Day



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from kidney failure require dialysis. However, 90,000 patients cannot access the services due to high costs and limited facilities. Despite the high prevalence of chronic kidney disease in Uganda, dialysis centres remain few in the face of increasing cases.

Odongo said drug abuse is also emerging as a risk factor, with some young people presenting with kidney complications linked to substance use.

KIDNEY TRANSPLANT

Dr Frank Asiimwe, a consultant urologist and transplant surgeon, said they have discharged three patients

OTHER CAUSES OF KIDNEY FAILURE

Experts say anyone can develop kidney failure at any age.

However, some people are at a higher risk than others. Other causes of kidney failure are:

- Diabetes
- High blood pressure (hypertension)
- Heart disease and/or heart

failure

- Obesity
- Over the age of 60
- Family history of kidney failure
- Personal history of acute kidney injury
- Smoking and/or use of tobacco products

who underwent a kidney transplant.

He said that during each episode, they do between four and six kidney transplants, adding that the next episode, which may take place in April or May, could see them carry out six to eight transplants.

He added that further transplants are likely to take place again in July and later in November or December.

COST OF DIALYSIS

Dr Rosemary Byanyima, the hospital's executive director, said dialysis at Mulago is subsidised and costs sh150,000 per session. She added that this is the official fee patients are required to pay and they are issued a receipt upon payment. In the private health facilities, a dialysis session costs over sh600,000.

Ideally, patients require three dialysis sessions a week, but many undergo only two due to financial constraints. The hospital currently has 25 dialysis machines capable of treating about 75 patients a day.

Although dialysis does not cure

kidney failure, it helps remove toxins from the blood when the kidneys can no longer perform their function.

Odongo said they have patients who have been on dialysis for 10, 20 and even 30 years. He added that dialysis also helps stabilise patients while they prepare for kidney transplant surgery.

SYMPTOMS OF KIDNEY FAILURE

Kidney failure symptoms include fatigue, severe swelling (edema) in legs/ankles, reduced or changed urine output (foamy/bloody), nausea, vomiting, confusion and intense itching. Other common signs are shortness of breath, metallic taste in the mouth, muscle cramps, high blood pressure and insomnia.

PRIME MINISTER SPEAKS

Speaking during the visit, Prime Minister Nabbanja urged Ugandans to utilise health facilities at lower levels to reduce pressure on Mulago Hospital.

She noted, despite the availability of several regional and general hospitals and lower health facilities, Mulago

continues to receive a high number of patients, partly due to poor adherence to the referral system. Many patients who could be managed at regional hospitals end up seeking care at Mulago, leading to congestion.

Nabbanja added that the Government remains committed to addressing the hospital's remaining challenges, including low staffing levels and inadequate funding, to enable it to realise its vision of becoming a centre for super-specialised medical services.

She also said the hospital continues to provide highly specialised plastic and re-constructive surgery, among others, helping to restore dignity and function to patients with complex mutilating conditions and congenital anomalies. These services, she said, demonstrate Mulago's growing capacity to deliver advanced medical care to Ugandans by Ugandans and encouraged the public to take advantage of them.

EXTORTION

Nabbanja urged health workers to desist from extortion, noting that the Government continues to receive reports of such practices.

Dr Diana Atwine, the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Health, encouraged people not to pay money for services and urged them to expose those involved in extortion so that action can be taken against them.

"We request that people who are asked to give money report these cases before they pay, because we may never know and we cannot deal with extortionists in hospitals, until such incidents are reported," she said.

MENTAL ILLNESS

Mulago Hospital celebrated Women's Day under the theme, Mental Health Challenges Building Resilience Among Female Health Care Workers at Mulago.

Dr Byanyima encouraged her staff who may be suffering from mental health problems not to shy away from treatment because they can end up in a worse situation if they are not helped.

"We encourage our staff to talk to your supervisors, other managers or even the human resource department. They should be able to help.

"We are aware of the mental health challenge, but we have not quantified it because people do not speak up. However, we want to respect their privacy," she said.

Byanyima said the overwhelming number of patients at the hospital was one of the causes of mental health problems among her staff.

"You handle a high number of patients. You are treating patients who are critically ill, like those in the intensive care unit (ICU), who are not responsive.

They are not able to talk to you; you have to think for them. And of course, in the ICU, where patients are on life support, there is high mortality. Treating them does not leave you the same," she said.