

Nwoya health centre: Where patients, corpses share space

Local leaders say the situation has persisted despite repeated appeals for intervention.

BY TEDDY DOKOTHO

When Ms Jacky Auma, 54, visited a patient at Kochgoma Health Centre III in Kochgoma Town Council, Nwoya District, in November 2025, a strange odour inside the maternity and neonatal ward immediately caught her attention.

Inside the unit, she noticed a section partitioned off with blinds. Curious, she inquired from attendants, only to learn that the space was being used to keep dead bodies awaiting collection by relatives due to the absence of a mortuary.

“It was frightening and unimaginable that patients and their caretakers are living too close to the dead bodies. This affects them psychologically,” Ms Auma said.

Her experience reflects a grim reality at the health centre, where staff have for years struggled to manage the dead in a facility not designed to accommodate them.

Last week, authorities at the facility were forced to bury an unidentified man in the backyard after his body went unclaimed for days.

“We did not have any option. He is believed to be a Langi, but no one could identify him or his relatives. His body had spent four days in the unit,” a medical officer at the facility, who preferred anonymity because they are not authorised to speak to the media, said.

Health Centre IIIs, by design, do not have mortuaries. They are meant to stabilise patients and refer critical cases to higher-level facilities such as Health Centre IVs, general hospitals or regional referral hospitals, which are equipped with mortuary services.

However, staff at Kochgoma say the reality on the ground is far more complex. “A facility like this one is built without a mortuary because we are expected to refer patients with deteriorating conditions. But many times, we get stuck when patients die here,” the medical officer added.

Kochgoma Health Centre III serves a



Patients queue at Kochgoma's outpatient unit for treatment. PHOTO/TEDDY DOKOTHO

largely transient population, including migrant farm workers who often arrive without relatives or identifiable next of kin. Health workers say it is not uncommon for such patients to be abandoned at the facility.

Due to the lack of a designated holding space, bodies are temporarily kept in available rooms within the facility, some located near patient wards.

The officer-in-charge, Ms Lilly Grace Ayamo, confirmed that dead bodies are currently being kept in a unit adjacent to the maternity and children's wards.

“The unit used is near the children's



Justification.

The health centre does not have a mortuary, which is by design, but we have always asked the local government to put up a simple structure for keeping dead bodies. Patients cannot share the same space with the dead,” Geoffrey Obama, Kochgoma Town Council chairperson

and women's ward. Unfortunately, patients can see these bodies, and it creates fear among them and their care-

takers, who begin to worry about their own survival,” she said.

Ms Ayamo cited a recent incident involving a young man believed to have been a casual worker who was brought to the facility unconscious and later abandoned.

“As his condition deteriorated, we could not refer him to Anaka General Hospital because there was no one to accompany him, which is required. He eventually died here,” she said.

Efforts to trace his relatives proved futile, leaving the facility in a dilemma over how to handle the body.

“Despite radio announcements and

HANDLING BODIES AT HCIII

- Body is temporarily held at the facility.
- Family is contacted to claim remains.
- If unclaimed, local leaders and police are informed.
- Efforts may include radio announcements and community tracing.
- Burial is carried out as a last resort if no relatives are found.

outreach efforts, the body was unclaimed. We informed the police, sub-county officials and district authorities before burying him,” she added.

Mr Geoffrey Obama, the Kochgoma Town Council chairperson, said the district has been urged to establish a temporary structure to house bodies away from patients.

“The health centre does not have a mortuary, which is by design, but we have always asked the local government to put up a simple structure for keeping dead bodies. Patients cannot share the same space with the dead,” Mr Obama said.

However, the Nwoya District Health Officer, Dr James Okello, said such an arrangement would contravene existing health policy.

“Health Centre IIIs are not supposed to have mortuaries. When deaths occur, bodies are expected to be transferred to facilities like Anaka General Hospital or Gulu Regional Referral Hospital, where proper mortuary services exist,” Dr Okello said.

He acknowledged the challenges faced at Kochgoma but maintained that a mortuary can only be established if the facility is upgraded to a Health Centre IV.

“Delays in transferring bodies sometimes occur, especially when families are not immediately available or when logistical challenges arise. In such cases, bodies may remain at the facility briefly as arrangements are made,” he added.