

ABOUT 1.6 MILLION PEOPLE IN UGANDA HAVE SICKLE CELL DISEASE

By John Ricks Kayizzi

Pearl Bank, in partnership with the Joint Clinical Research Centre (JCRC) and the Rotary Club of Kampala Springs, has unveiled a campaign aimed at raising sh14b towards erecting a bone marrow transplant centre.

To kick-start the campaign, Pearl Bank recently launched a fundraising platform to enable individuals and organisations to contribute to the cause.

"This approach reflects a broader strategy of community mobilisation, recognising that the scale of the project requires collective effort. This platform will enable both corporates and individuals to contribute," Julius Kakeeto, the managing director/CEO of Pearl Bank, said during the launch ceremony at Bulange, Mengo in Kampala recently.

He said whereas the establishment of the facility, to be located in Lubowa on Entebbe Road, would cost about sh14b, another \$1.25m will be allocated towards remodelling existing structures and acquiring critical equipment.

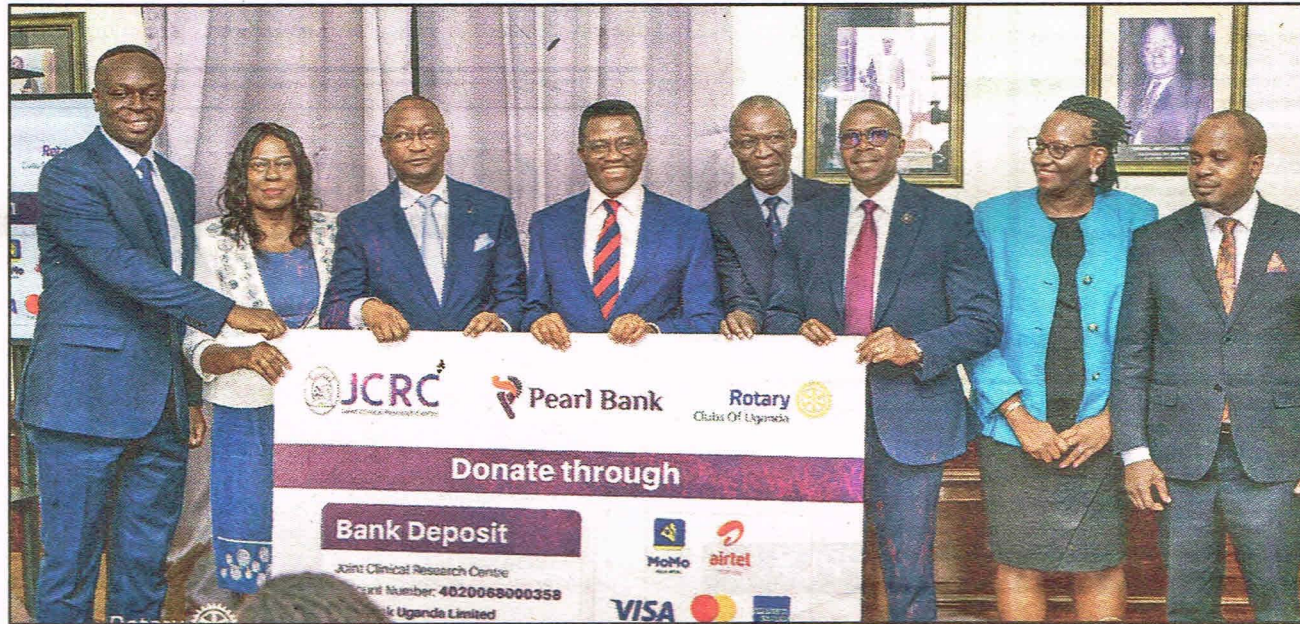
As Kakeeto announced a contribution of sh200m from Pearl Bank towards the initiative, he disclosed that the cause has already attracted support from the private sector.

BUGANDA KINGDOM ON BOARD

Charles Peter Mayiga, the Katikiro of the Buganda kingdom, has thrown his weight behind the initiative, linking it to years of health advocacy driven by the kingdom.

He underscored the importance of prioritising health as a foundation for

CAMPAIGN TO RAISE SH14B FOR BONE MARROW TRANSPLANT UNIT UNVEILED



L-R: Kakeeto, Kityo, Rotary district governor of D9213 Geoffrey Kitakule, Mayiga and other officials at Bulange, Mengo, as they unveiled a campaign to raise sh14b for erecting a bone marrow transplant centre recently

national development.

"In 2014, we started the Kabaka's Birthday Run to promote different health causes," Mayiga said, tracing the evolution of the campaign from fistula treatment to sickle cell awareness and HIV/AIDS prevention.

"We must always find time for the good things, like health. You don't achieve anything if you are not well," he said.

Mayiga recalled how cultural misconceptions once discouraged marriages into families affected by the sickle

SPECIALISED ROOMS

The planned facility will include specialised "clean rooms", highly controlled environments designed to prevent infections in immunocompromised patients.

These rooms are essential for successful bone marrow transplants and represent a significant upgrade in Uganda's medical infrastructure.

According to data from the Ministry of Health, Uganda has a high burden of sickle cell disease, with an estimated 20,000-25,000 babies born with the condition annually.

It is estimated that approximately 1.6 million people in Uganda are affected by the disease, while over seven million people carry the sickle cell trait.

referred to as *Nnalubiri* in parts of Buganda, the disease was often attributed to curses, particularly targeting women.

Dr Cissy Kityo Mutuluza, the executive director of the Joint Clinical Research Centre, urged Ugandans to stop the financial haemorrhage and medical tourism the country faces as sickle cell disease patients travel overseas, especially to India and the US, for specialised care.

"Why face all the trouble when we can replicate what is going on in those countries' medical facilities and provide affordable medical care to thousands of our people?" she said.

Kityo said the proposed facility will be a game-changer, not just for treatment, but also for research and innovation.

She emphasised that the initiative goes beyond addressing sickle cell disease, adding that the infrastructure will also support advanced research into gene therapy, a rapidly evolving field with potential applications in curing both sickle cell disease and HIV/AIDS.

ENDING MEDICAL TOURISM

One of the strongest arguments for establishing a bone marrow transplant centre in Uganda is cost reduction. Currently, the procedure is prohibitively expensive for most Ugandans, largely due to travel, accommodation and treatment expenses incurred abroad.

Kityo noted that bringing the service closer to patients will dramatically lower these costs.

"When we bring this facility closer, we expect the costs will be lower to the patient, and also the government may come in to support this cause," she said.

cell condition, highlighting the urgent need for both medical and social interventions.

While awareness campaigns have improved public understanding and encouraged premarital testing, treatment options in Uganda remain limited.

DISEASE BURDEN

Uganda continues to grapple with high rates of sickle cell disease, a condition that has long been misunderstood and stigmatised in many communities. Historically