

WHY STROKE IS ATTACKING YOUTH

PHOTO BY VIOLET NABATANZI

By John Musenze

Ssempijja, 21, had never imagined he would ever spend Wednesdays seated among dozens of stroke patients at Mulago National Referral Hospital, relearning how to walk, stretch his fingers and rebuild a life interrupted far too early.

However, he is now among many patients attending the hospital's stroke clinic every Wednesday, which doctors say handles nearly 170 patients every week, translating to over 500 patients monthly. Many are elderly, but increasingly, young people like Ssempijja are becoming part of the queue.

In April last year, Ssempijja collapsed in his bed sitting after suddenly losing energy on the left side of his body. He had ignored persistent migraines and exhaustion, believing they were caused by long working hours and stress.

"I have never smoked, I am not obese and I used to eat normal food. Every Ugandan is stressed, so it's hard for me to say that it was the cause of my illness. I did not get any warning signs, but I collapsed and could no longer feel my left side. I was taken to a private clinic where I was told I had had a stroke. My left side was paralysed," he tells *New Vision*.

"The tests confirmed I had high blood pressure, which I did not even know. That is what doctors are saying caused the stroke," Ssempijja adds.

The stroke forced him to stop working and return to live with relatives who now help him through recovery. Simple tasks like buttoning a shirt or climbing stairs remain difficult.

"Sometimes I get frustrated because my friends continued with life while mine suddenly stopped. But coming here and seeing others recovering gives me hope that one day I will fully heal," he says.

Treating stroke, Ssempijja says, is costly because he has to undergo regular scans, pay consultation fees and buy medicine. According to him, the biggest burden is emotional because it is his mother and brother who help him bathe and use the restrooms.

"I am now getting better. I could not talk; my eyes were a bit blurry when I had just fallen sick. I move on a wheelchair and without support, I can't do anything," Ssempijja adds.

"I want young people to stop thinking that stroke only attacks old people. Go for check-ups, reduce stress, exercise and take



A young girl who suffered a stroke at a medical facility

SYMPTOMS

Dr Steven Muwonge Matovu, a senior consultant physician in neurology, says many people ignore or fail to recognise warning signs, including sudden numbness, slurred speech, dizziness, blurred vision or weakness on one side of the body, before a major stroke develops, causing severe brain damage.

Specialists say stroke treatment is time-sensitive because certain clot-dissolving medicines are most effective within the first three hours after symptoms begin. Unfortunately, many Ugandan patients arrive at the hospital long after this critical treatment window has already passed.

Matovu also highlights the heavy financial burden associated with stroke treatment and rehabilitation. Management often requires expensive investigations, such as CT scans, MRI scans, laboratory tests, heart examinations, medication and prolonged physiotherapy that many Ugandan families struggle to afford consistently.

"Stroke patients usually stay longer on hospital wards because of disability, nursing care and rehabilitation needs. Families spend heavily on investigations, treatment and long-term recovery, which creates serious financial and emotional pressure," Matovu explains.

care of your body. I ignored many things because I thought I was too young for serious illness. I was wrong," he adds.

RIISING ADMISSIONS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Ssempijja's experience reflects a growing reality quietly emerging across Uganda, where doctors are reporting increasing numbers of young adults suffering strokes, a condition once considered rare among people below 40 years of age. Specialists say hospital wards are now admitting more young patients, teenagers and children than ever before, raising alarm within the health sector.

For decades, stroke was widely linked to old age, retirement and advanced years. Today, however, neurologists and rehabilitation experts said changing lifestyles, stress and untreated non-communicable diseases are exposing young Ugandans to a growing and potentially deadly

health burden.

"The number of patients we are seeing who are relatively young, below 35 years old, is increasing each passing year. The days when stroke was considered a disease for older people are changing very fast," Dr Joel Kiryabwire, the head of the neurosurgical unit at Mulago Hospital, says.

Stroke is among Uganda's leading causes of death and disability. Doctors at Mulago Hospital say about five stroke patients are admitted daily, with a growing percentage involving younger adults who would traditionally not be considered high-risk patients for such a condition.

Medical experts say a stroke occurs when blood supply to the brain is interrupted. This may happen when a blood vessel is blocked by a clot, known as an ischemic stroke, or when a blood vessel bursts

and bleeds into brain tissue, causing what doctors call a haemorrhagic stroke.

In both forms, brain cells are deprived of oxygen and begin dying within minutes. Delayed treatment can lead to paralysis, speech difficulties, permanent disability or death, depending on which part of the brain is affected and how quickly medical intervention is provided.

According to Kiryabwire, one of the biggest drivers of stroke is poorly controlled high blood pressure, especially among young people who rarely monitor their health or seek routine medical examination, unless symptoms become severe and unavoidable.

"Your blood pressure should remain normal at all times. Many people ignore it, until complications occur. If blood pressure rises repeatedly, then it is not being managed properly and the risk of stroke increases significantly," he says.

Kiryabwire warns that many young people wrongly assume hypertension is an illness affecting only elderly individuals, yet modern lifestyles characterised by unhealthy eating, limited exercise, stress and alcohol

consumption are increasing cardiovascular risks among younger generations

faster than before.

A GROWING NATIONAL BURDEN

Dr Steven Muwonge Matovu, a senior consultant physician in neurology, says stroke has become a major public health burden within Uganda's healthcare system, with hospitals increasingly overwhelmed by patients requiring prolonged treatment, rehabilitation and specialised neurological care.

According to Matovu, stroke is now among Uganda's top five causes of death and disability. At Mulago Hospital alone, about 3.7% of adult admissions are stroke-related, while nearly 27% of admissions in the neurology unit involve stroke patients.

Matovu says although the biological causes of stroke have not drastically changed over the years, modern lifestyles have significantly increased exposure to major risk factors, particularly among urban populations, where unhealthy habits are becoming increasingly common among younger people.

"These days, children are eating chips and processed foods regularly. Young people are smoking more, drinking excessive alcohol and living sedentary lifestyles. These are the same habits that increase high blood pressure, diabetes and eventually the risk of stroke," he says.

Matovu warns that another major challenge is that illnesses associated with stroke often develop silently without obvious symptoms. Many patients only discover they have hypertension, diabetes or dangerously high cholesterol after suffering serious complications such as stroke or heart disease.

"You may look fine and think you are healthy because you are not overweight. But cholesterol can still be high and blood pressure dangerously elevated. That is why regular medical check-ups are extremely important, especially for young people who think they are safe," he says.

Beyond lifestyle-related causes, Matovu adds that doctors also encounter stroke cases linked to heart disease, blood vessel abnormalities, viral infections, drug abuse and conditions, such as sickle cell disease, which can interfere with normal blood circulation and increase clot formation risks.

LIFESTYLE DRIVING THE CRISIS

At the Stroke Rehabilitation Centre in Wampewo, Wakiso district, doctors are witnessing the consequences of the growing crisis firsthand as increasing numbers of younger stroke survivors arrive requiring long-term rehabilitation, physiotherapy and emotional support to regain movement and independence after suffering brain damage.

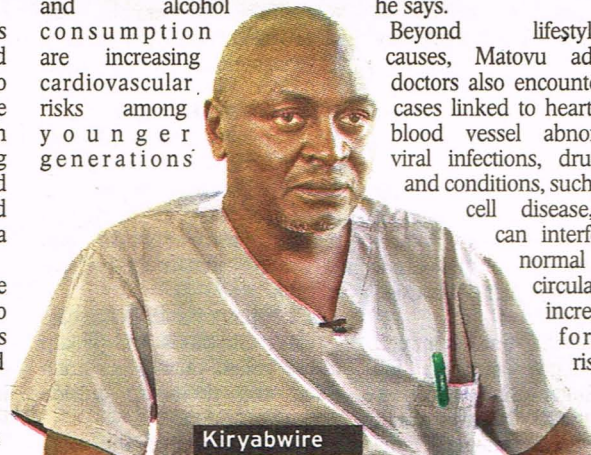
"Last year, our facility saw over 1,000 patients, with about 70% of these being youth aged between 25 and 35. The increase is largely because of lifestyle," Dr Ibrahim Bukenya of the Stroke Rehabilitation Centre in Wampewo, says.

Recovery, according to Bukenya, is often long, emotionally exhausting and financially draining. Some stroke survivors recover fully, while others remain partially disabled or bedridden, depending on how severe the stroke was and how quickly treatment and rehabilitation were initiated after the stroke occurred.

Doctors estimate that physiotherapy sessions at government facilities cost between sh20,000 and 50,000, while private rehabilitation centres charge between sh50,000 and sh100,000 per session. Some patients require several sessions weekly for months or years, depending on recovery progress and disability levels.

Health experts say prevention remains the most effective solution to Uganda's growing stroke burden. They encourage young people to regularly check blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels, exercise consistently, reduce stress, avoid smoking and limit excessive alcohol consumption before complications emerge.

Globally, the World Health Organisation estimates that 15 million people suffer a stroke every year. About five million die, while another five million remain permanently disabled, with low- and middle-income countries experiencing the fastest rise in cases driven largely by lifestyle changes.



Kiryabwire