

National News

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Uganda launches must-do sickle cell screening at birth

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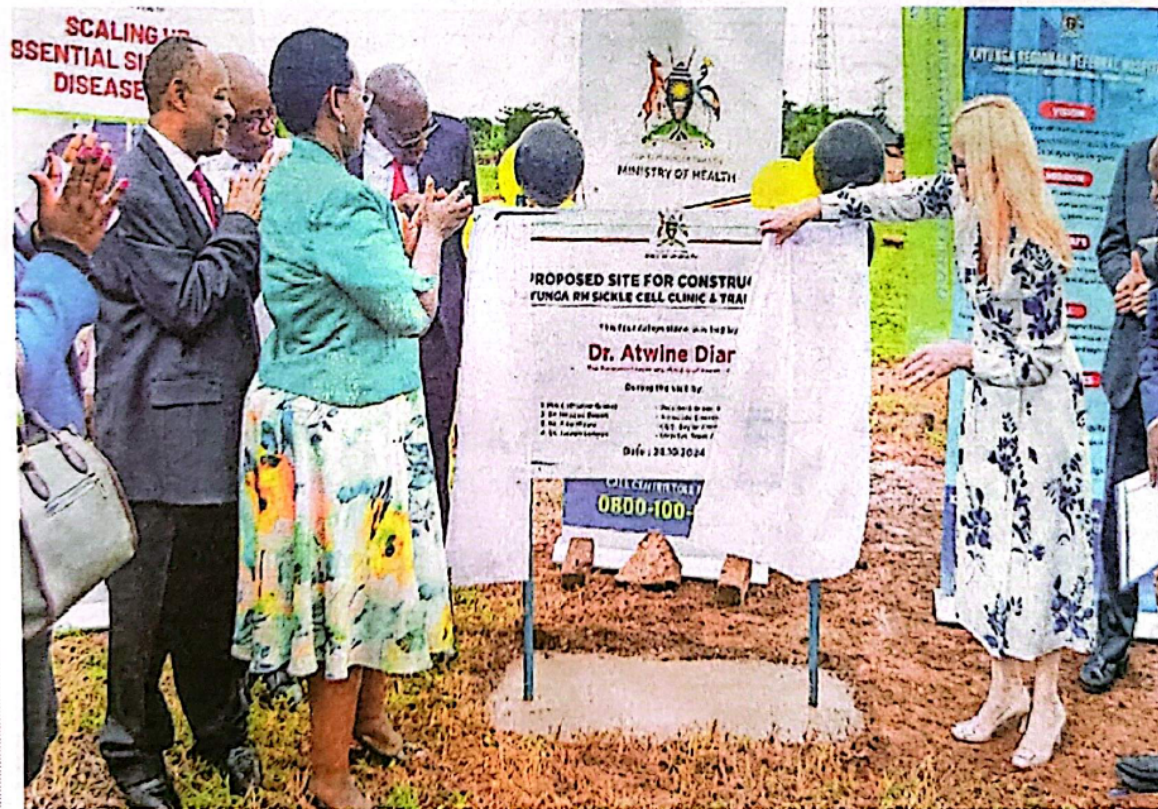
BY SYLVIA NAMAGEMBE

The government has rolled out a must-do nationwide sickle cell screening for newborns to reduce the disease's contribution to Uganda's under-five deaths.

Sickle cell disease (SCD) remains a major contributor to child death in Uganda, with data from the Health ministry showing that 20,000 babies are born with the condition every year.

The figures also show that an estimated 6,000 to 9,000 of the babies die before their fifth birthday, mainly from preventable complications.

Dr Diana Atwine, the Health ministry permanent secretary, said the early



Lifesaving Sickle Cell Care Programme is launched in Kayunga in 2024. PHOTO/HEALTH MINISTRY

screening will enable immediate linkage to care and prevent deaths caused by complications from late detection.

"We are targeting reducing under-five mortality, and children with sickle cell disease take a large portion of those numbers, which will be worse than HIV/AIDS and drain a lot of our resources. They require constant blood transfusions in competition with other disorders like leukemia," she said.

Newborn screening will now be mandatory at birth, and children diagnosed with the disease will be followed up to manage complications such as organ failure.

Dr Atwine said the laboratory capacity has been strengthened, and the rapid diagnostic tests (RDTs) similar to those used for HIV/AIDS will be used to record results immediately on child health cards.

During the launch at the Ministry of Health headquarters yesterday, Dr Atwine revealed that hydroxyurea, previously scarce, has been added to the essential medicines list, with efforts underway to ensure it is available even at lower-level health facilities.

Hydroxyurea is a crucial oral medication identified by the World Health Organization as a key disease-modifying agent for sickle cell disease. It reduces pain crises and blood transfusion needs by increasing fetal hemoglobin.

She added that the National Medical Stores (NMS) will begin supplying sickle cell RDT kits to public facilities starting February 2026 for free screening, while the private sector has been encouraged to make testing widely accessible.

"When we do the early screening, we link these children to early care so that