

Dr. Donald Rukare



Why tribalise the healthcare system?

Access to quality affordable health care is one of the tenets of a functioning country. While there is no doubt that in Uganda today there are a number of private and public medical facilities, affordable access to quality healthcare remains a distant dream for the majority of Ugandans.

This fact brings me to the reason for this article. During December of last year, I paid a visit to a colleague's sick sister who had been admitted to Old Mulago in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). Upon getting to Old Mulago I was confronted by several individuals lying on the floor and it is not clear who was the patient, the attendant or lodger!

The so-called ICU left a lot to be desired let alone the fact that anyone could access it without restriction! The operating theatre next door was no better. It left me wondering if any patient would emerge out of it alive. It was clear that not much had been done to these facilities since their construction in the 60s I suspect. Hopefully, the ongoing refurbishment of Mulago Hospital will remedy the situation.

What worried me and scared me to the core was that my colleague and friend made an observation that during their almost a week's stay at Old Mulago, the majority of patients were from northern Uganda.

She calmly told me, "Don, you Banyankole go to the private hospitals as you can afford while we northerners have to come here to Old Mulago, which is free". I honestly had no answer to this statement. While it is definitely not true that it is only northerners that are admitted at Old Mulago (my own

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dear dad before passing on, spent several months at Mulago), the perception that it is very chilling and revealing of what I call the perceived tribalisation of our healthcare system.

The fact that it was coming from my colleague and friend was even more worrisome. The health care question cuts across all of us in Uganda. How many

Ugandans can afford the exorbitant medical bills charged in the growing private medical facilities? Not many I believe.

The daily fee in an ICU ranges between sh2m - sh5m. That is, if you are lucky enough to find a free bed! Apart from the exorbitant fees, we have few functional ICUs which further complicates the picture. A knowledgeable health expert reveals that we have less than 10 fully operational and functional ICUs in the country. These are the private ICUs in International Hospital Kampala (IHK), Nakasero Hospital Kampala, (NHK), Case, Nsambya, Lacor and Victoria Hospitals. In the public arena we have them at Mulago, Mbarara and Jinja government hospitals.

The Lira one is not functional. An operation costs about the same amount of money depending on the nature. In May last year, our son underwent two operations within a span of one week, which left us nearly bankrupt!

We routinely hear and read about high-ranking government officials being flown off to foreign lands to receive lifesaving specialised medical attention at great public cost. The thought that access to quality care is the preserve of a few is revealing and concerning. We as a country cannot be tone deaf to these perceptions and voices. We need to seriously address the issue of having an affordable quality healthcare system for all Ugandans as a national priority.

A fully functional national health insurance system for all Ugandans and prioritisation of the health sector in the national budget are possible ways to go to guarantee accessible, affordable and quality health care for us all.

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