



Our family nurse infected my brother and I with HIV

In the build-up to World AIDS Day on December 1, Vision Group is spearheading the drive to get everybody involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Today, Ritah Mukasa writes about Sarah and her sibling who contracted HIV from an injection administered by a nurse

Twenty-two years ago, Sarah, was born a healthy baby girl. Little did her parents know what awaited her while growing up. The family nurse they always ran to for treatment intentionally infected her and her young brother with HIV.

Sarah, who is in her second year at university, hails from Masindi. She is the third-born in a family of five children. Her parents and three siblings are HIV-negative.

"I was tested in 2009 while preparing to sit my Primary Leaving Exams and my parents found out that I was HIV positive," she says.

Sarah adds that this was after suffering on and off fevers that prompted her parents to take her for medical checkup.

Later, it was discovered that her younger brother was also HIV-positive.

I hated drugs

After testing positive, I was started on septrine. Our situation, however, challenged the medical personnel in Masindi Hospital. They wondered how my parents and siblings were HIV-negative and we were positive. However, it was during this time that it was discovered that a nurse from a nearby clinic, who used to treat us, had injected us with her blood.

Unfortunately, she passed on shortly before any legal action could be taken.

Meanwhile, my parents were counselled to come to terms with our condition that involved giving us drugs on time and taking good care of us.

Since I was still young, this was kept a secret from me and my siblings. I desperately longed to know why I was condemned to daily drugs. By that time, I rarely fell sick but I had to swallow septrine daily and at a particular time.

By the time I joined secondary school; I was tired of taking the drugs and tasked my mother with telling me why I had to and if she was hiding something from me.

I needed anything that would ease the pills burden. But she did not disclose anything.

For Senior One, I joined a boarding school, so the environment was not conducive for me to take the drugs.

Feeling the stigma

Even when I did not know my

sero status, I had to conceal the drugs from my classmates, fearing to be associated with HIV.

Rumours were already making rounds about some students being HIV-positive because they swallowed drugs daily.

So I became cautious not to be seen taking drugs. Even the teachers and the matron did not know. I would wait for everybody to go to class and remain in the dormitory just to take the drugs. But it was not easy because this was against school rules. It was deemed as dodging classes and would attract expulsion.

So on many occasions I missed taking the drugs for days. As a result, my CD4 count dropped to 24 and by Senior Four, I would get fevers, headaches, boils and diarrhoea.

My parents disclosure

But even in that state, I still did not take drugs. Being HIV-positive did not cross my mind because, first, I was a virgin and second, I did not remember having a blood transfusion or sharing sharp instruments with a stranger who could probably have infected me as we were taught at school.

So, even though I was hospitalised, I refused to take the drugs.

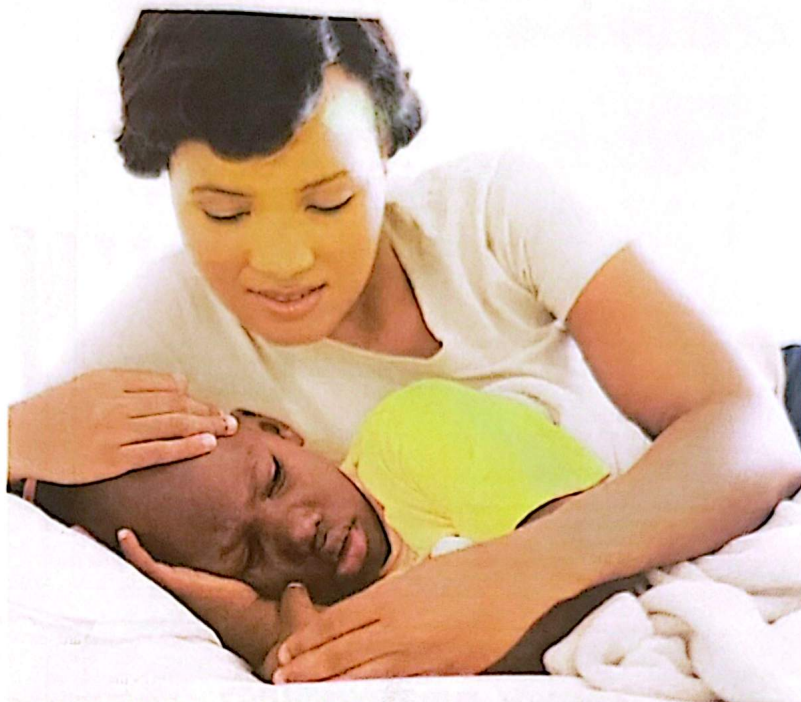
But now more than ever, I wanted to know why I was going through all that 'torture' and put mother on pressure to tell me. The year was 2013.

Left with no option and desperate to save my life, my mother, with the help of counsellors, disclosed to me that I was living with HIV.

I can recall how I reacted to the sad news. I was devastated.

Apart from breaking down for days, I hated my parents; especially my mother, because I thought she had infected me during birth.

How could she be so careless, to give me HIV well-knowing she was sick during pregnancy? Such statements lingered in my mind. I could hardly eat, drink or sleep. No



Parents should be able to comfort their children if they have been exposed to HIV early in life

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amount of comforting words from the counsellors and mum could heal my hurt.

Fortunately, after a month of counselling, I came to terms with my condition.

My mother told me how I got the virus and also informed me of how she and dad had tested HIV negative in a series of tests.

I was heartbroken when I heard that my young brother had also fallen victim to the devious plans of that nurse. I forgave my mother and accepted to take the drugs.

This time due to my fragile health, I was put on antiretrovirals and taught how to live positively.

I gradually got used to the drugs and took them in Senior Five and six. This time I took extra precaution not to miss the pills. I appreciated that my life depended on them, so, I found all ways of taking them even though I did not disclose my status to any of my friends for fear of stigma.

Coming to Kampala

Two years ago, I left my parents' home in Masindi and came to Kampala to join university. I was invited to stay at my aunt's place as I searched for a good hostel.

I also joined the youth group at TASO (The Aids Support

Organisation) in Mulago. This greatly changed my life. I was surprised that the youth living with HIV looked healthy and happy.

To them, HIV is never a hindrance to a brighter future. I felt at peace in their midst, which helped me to come out positively about my status.

Meanwhile, my aunt was clueless about my status, yet also I was not ready to disclose it to her.

I hid the drugs and all documents from her and her husband, a doctor. After a few months, I left their home for the hostel.

I joined the Uganda Network of Young People Living with HIV (UNYPA) that have also taught me a lot about living positively. I am also their ambassador.

Under UNYPA, I attend workshops and conferences creating awareness about HIV, especially among the youth.

SARAH'S ADVICE

To all the people living with HIV, avoid risks such as sleeping with multiple partners as this exposes you to more infections. Also, take your drugs religiously to enjoy a happier and long life.

To the HIV-negative people, especially the youth, the HIV scourge is real. It does not spare those living recklessly, so be responsible and stay away from the pill

burden. I also encourage the young and old to test regularly and if found with the virus, life has to continue. Accept your condition and respect the pills. And for parents, please do not trust anybody with the life of your children. Not even medical personnel. Be around and closely monitor whatever they administer to them during treatment.

Sarah's second name has been left out in order to protect her boyfriend, who is not yet comfortable with disclosure. They have dated for some time. He is HIV-negative but has not yet disclosed his discordance relationship to his family. He says he will do so when the time comes.