

PEOPLE BATTLING HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE SHOULD LEARN TO CONTAIN STRESS

# Managing stroke among the elderly

BY AGNES KYÖTALENGERIRE

**T**he nation is celebrating the life of John Ssebaana Kizito, the former Democratic Party leader, who on Monday succumbed to stroke. Apparently, stroke is a health condition common among the elderly. In our article, *Sunday Vision* explores how the health condition can be prevented as well as how to manage it.

According to Dr Joel Kiryabwire, a neuro-surgeon at Mulago Hospital, stroke is a sudden loss of brain function where one becomes unconscious and cannot move one side of the body or do one of the normal functions of the brain like hearing or speaking.

Kiryabwire says since stroke happens suddenly, it may result from blockage in the blood vessels due to a clot, thus cutting off blood supply to the brain, a medical condition also referred to as Ischemic stroke.

This type of stroke accounts for up to 87% of all strokes and is common among elderly people with heart problems.

"When the blood supply is cut off, the brain cells become damaged, making the part of the body controlled by the affected brain area lose function or even the entire side of the body," he explains.

In some other cases, one may get stroke when a blood vessel suddenly bursts open due to increased pressure or because the vessel is narrow and weak, making blood to spill into the brain, causing damage to the brain cells.

As a result, the affected part of the brain stops functioning, a condition medically termed as hemorrhagic stroke. He cautions that older persons with hypertension are more likely to suffer from this kind of stroke but also those with diabetes are more at risk.

## HOW COMMON IS STROKE?

Emmanuel Odhiambo, a physiotherapist with PhysioTech Rehabilitation Centre in Mpererwe, Kampala, says they register about 10 new cases of stroke at the clinic monthly, of which eight are elderly people in the age bracket of 60 to 80 years.

Records from the department of neuro-surgery in Mulago Hospital, estimate that in a week, about three to four new cases of elderly patients with stroke are registered at the hospital.

However, Dr Kiryabwire notes that the number could be bigger, but not all stroke patients require surgery.

Of the stroke cases registered, Kiryabwire says, about 75% of the patients they admit have a history of poorly managed high blood pressure, kidney diseases and diabetes. The sudden rise in the blood pressure makes the blood vessels to burst. Prior to the stroke, there is tendency to have a severe or splitting headache, which



Stephen Ssemmanda, a stroke survivor, during therapy exercise at Stroke Rehabilitation Centre in Lutetele on October 11 last year. Stroke management largely depends on the cause

does not respond to medication together with poor vision.

Not adhering to medication is the common cause of stroke in patients with high blood-pressure as some patients tend to stop taking the medication when the pressure stabilises.

The other factors causing stroke among adults include: heart problems and poorly controlled diseases such as diabetes and sickle cell anaemia.

Relatedly, Dr Michael Muhumuza, the senior consultant neuro-surgeon at Mulago Hospital, says people are suffering from stroke because of poor lifestyle habits which damage blood vessels such as smoking and eating fatty foods that cause the accumulated cholesterol to block the vessels.

If you are the kind who likes eating fast foods which are rather fatty and rarely eat fruits and vegetables, then you are at risk of developing stroke. Aside, the sedentary lifestyle which involves sitting a lot without exercising regularly is another

## SIGNS

Unfortunately, the signs are not presented prior to the incident because it happens suddenly; someone suddenly collapses, explains Muhumuza. He goes ahead to explain that when they wake up, they will fail to walk or talk, depending on which part of the brain is affected. The victims also experience seizures following a fall and immediately a drift into unconscious state.

They experience weakness in the muscles and fail to move one or both limbs. In the worst scenario, the whole side of the body may become paralysed. The other signs include: drooping of the side of the face, drooling of saliva, numbness, difficulty in speaking.

contributing factor of stroke.

## MANAGEMENT OF STROKE

Dr Michael Mungoma, a physician at Mulago Hospital, says managing stroke largely depends on the cause.

Subsequently, there is rehabilitation of the patient who in this case is unable to do certain body functions. Mungoma explains and adds that people whose body parts are paralysed are put on physiotherapy.

Odhiambo says physiotherapy is simply the treatment of an injury or deformity using physical methods such as massage, heat treatment, and exercise rather than by drugs or surgery.

Odhiambo says before embarking on physiotherapy, it is important that the patient and the carer are given counselling, although many physiotherapists tend to ignore it. Counselling helps the patient to accept the condition, leave with it and also adhere to treatment, Odhiambo explains.

Muscle strengthening is critical in case of weakness on the affected side. The physiotherapists also consider minimising contractures for muscles that tend to stiffen and try as much as possible to rehabilitate the patient back to function abilities, for example, by teaching them to hold a cup and feed, walk and other activities of daily living like toilet use, Odhiambo says.

Sometimes, the patients require assistive devices such as cork up splints. These are fixed on the hands to keep them in a functional position since most of the patients tend to develop stiffness due to convulsions. Arm braces also come in handy to help maintain the shoulder joints in their position to avoid dislocation.

Odhiambo also says the patients are given walkers or tripled stands to aid the walking. He adds that since most patients develop floppy foot or dropping foot, they are given special foot splints to keep the foot in normal position.

But also since they have a tendency to drag the affected foot, the carers are encouraged to provide protective gear like socks or light shoes to avoid injury.

The bedridden elderly patients with stroke are regularly helped to do passive movements. In this case the carers in intervals moves their hands and legs. This, according to Odhiambo, helps to maintain blood circulation, prevent muscle contractures as well as maintain muscle tone.

For the patients who cannot turn, the caretakers are advised to turn them after two hours to avoid developing bed sores.

## RECOVERY

Dr Kiryabwire says quite a number of patients die at the onset because their attendants are waiting for them to recover and only realise hours later that they are dead.

He, however, says those with significant stroke do not recover. "They eventually get into a vegetative state where they cannot do anything for themselves and end up in a wheel chair and have to depend on their family members for everything," he explains.

Muhumuza notes that those who recover get significant disability such as muscle weakness, especially on the limbs. They also get residual problems for example if the speech centre was affected, their speech

# 4

## FIRST AID FOR STROKE

According to Dr Kiryabwire, first aid for stroke is very critical because some elderly patients die in the first hours the stroke happens, while their relatives wait for them to regain consciousness so that they can take them to hospital.

**1** He says immediately you suspect that someone has got a stroke, carry and put them in a safe place like on the bed or even on the ground on a clean mat or carpet.

**2** They should be made to lie in the recovery position, which is usually the left side, so that they do not swallow saliva or vomit when they throw up.

He says most stroke patients develop pneumonia when they swallow vomit and it gets into their chest.

**3** If the patient is having seizures, put a small piece of wood at the tip of their tongue to prevent them from biting their tongue. Avoid pushing the piece of cloth deep into the mouth because it makes the tongue fall backwards and the patient cannot breathe.

**4** Clean off the vomit and saliva that forms on the mouth and do not wait for the patient to regain consciousness, rush them to the nearest health facility for treatment.

may not be perfect as before.

## PREVENTION

Muhumuza thinks prevention is better because there are no clear warning signs of stroke and it happens suddenly.

If you are elderly and have diabetes, you are hypertensive or have both, it is important to manage these conditions that put you at risk by having regular medical checkup, preferably once a year, he cautions and says it is also important to regularly check cholesterol levels in the blood.

Mungoma discourages patients with chronic high blood pressure and diabetes against relying on herbal medication and prayers.

"Because some patients with high blood pressure never experience symptoms, they should regularly monitor their blood pressure because it may increase as they wait for the symptoms to show," Kiryabwire advises.

He urges the elderly battling high blood pressure to learn to contain stress because when a stressful event sets in, the blood pressure shots up, causing a stroke.

It is also important that the elderly guard against developing diseases such as high blood pressure, kidney diseases and diabetes by living an active life through regular exercise, eating healthy foods with less oils and fats — and more of fruits, vegetables with plenty of water about eight glasses a day.