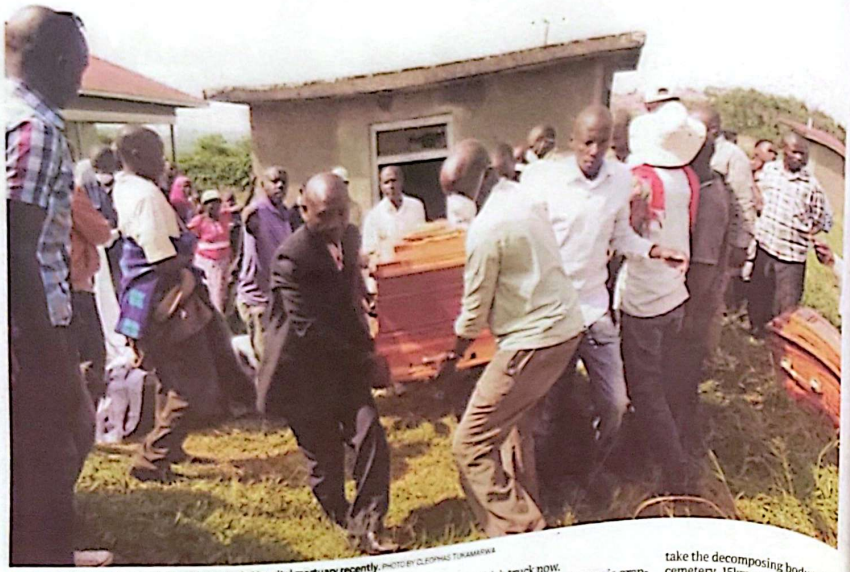
How unclaimed bodies are choking

Crisis. Life is often a puzzle for each one of us. Death is sometimes, too, for many. Imagine dying, say in an accident, and your body is taken to the mortuary but no one claims it. Others die alone in hospitals and their bodies end up in the mortuaries without their relatives' knowledge. What happens thereafter is a burdensome process, writes **Frederic Musisi**



For burial. People collect a body from Lyantonde Hospital mortuary recently. PHOTO BY GEOFFREY TUKAMUHEBWA

KAMPALA. "You live as long as you are remembered," goes a Russian proverb.

The saying brings hope of eternal life to some, but means little for the many others already forgotten by the time they breathe their last.

Uganda is one of the African countries with the highest number of road accidents, according to World Health Organisation. On the other hand, malaria and respiratory diseases top the leading causes of death in hospitals, according to Ministry of Health.

Most of those people, depending on status, will be accorded befitting send-offs and mourned long after by family and friends. Their lifetimes will be recounted. Their graves will be dug well and cemented after interment, for some flowers will be laid, and memories will be held forever.

But that's not how the story ends for everyone.

There are hundreds of bodies that go unclaimed at mortuaries across the country every year and with the breakdown of facilities at some hospitals, the situation is unspeakably devastating when they [bodies] start decomposing.

According to the Director of Health Services in police, Dr Moses Byaruhanga, a body becomes classified as "unclaimed" when no kinfolks or friends claim them for burial and to make matters worse when police cannot identify community members or anyone to notify.

"This is common for us because police pick bodies every other day from accident scenes, bars, hotels and on streets. Postmortems are at times conducted to ascertain the cause of death, the work is done, but then we get stranded with the bodies," Dr Byaruhanga recently told *Sunday Monitor*.

Only a small fraction, he added, die in hospitals and their bodies go unclaimed.

However, this is near to customary in the Karamoja sub-region where [some] relatives abandon their departed ones in mortuaries. A senior official at one of the hospitals told *Sunday Monitor* that in circumstances when relatives are compelled to "take away" their dead, especially the children; some are fond of hurling the bodies in bushes.

Kawolo General Hospital in because it near several black spots on the road.

Officials at the hospital relish every minute traffic officers spend on the tarmac to check errant drivers, but otherwise not a single week goes by without road carnage if the men and women in white are not deployed. Accidents with more than three fatalities spell burden for management because the hospital's functional mortuary can accommodate only three bodies.

If the bodies are not claimed within three days they are then relocated to a nearby decrepit mortuary without a refrigerator as management engages the Lugazi municipal authorities to pick them up for burial.

On any given sunny day, as the process drags, the stink and the swarm of bluebottle houseflies that colonise the area can shake one's faith.

LAW

Section 26 of the 1935 Public Health Act, amended in 2000, imposes on local authorities the responsibility to remove and bury bodies of destitute persons and of unclaimed bodies.

The law, designed during the British colonial administration, also ensured that each of the 16 districts at the time of independence had a public cemetery.

And for long these cemeteries served the purpose until gerrymandering set in and land became a hot cake. The insatiable

Unidentified, unclaimed

The dead woman, who appeared somewhere in her 30s, lay naked on the gurney for about 30 minutes as the mortuary attendant at one of the main hospitals in eastern Uganda waited for a helping hand from a co-worker, who was due to report for work, to put the body in the freezer.

The body had been delivered to of the woman had been picked and brought here by police two days earlier. The Local Council (LC) 1 who called police to the scene where she was found did not know her but the doctors established she had been intoxicated and gang raped.

The mortuary attendant gave this reporter the life depressing access to the facility for three days, including volunteering the necessary information but referred to management for official comments on the problem of unclaimed bodies.

The hospital head was uncooperative, at first requested for time, and later referred to the Ministry of Health in Kampala. Hence the withholding of the hospital name to protect the identity of the mortuary attendant, who pitiably earns Shs200,000 per month.

His two sidekicks who are charged with picking up unclaimed bodies, which at times are decomposing, for burial at the district cemetery are every month handed Shs50,000 to split equally as salary for full time employment.

After two days, the area police that picked up the woman, relayed news to the hospital that they had probed widely and even interrogated some potential suspects but the woman was not known.

The suspicion, however, was which truck now.

The hospital mortuary is grappling with shortage of several essentials, from embalming compounds to kits used in postmortem.

After three days, the worst was starting to happen; her semi-corpulent frame had started decomposing, and the sickly stink unbearable, but the mortuary attendant kept saying the situation was not that bad because "it is only one body around today (Wednesday)."

Grim path from death to burial

Early that morning the hospital management had notified officials concerned at the district headquarters, which are situated within a spitting distance. The response was more sickening. That the vehicle usually allocated for body pick-ups had broken down and there was no money to fuel the alternative.

That Wednesday afternoon, two male boda boda accident victims were brought by a police pickup truck to the mortuary. It was after the mortuary attendant had paced back and forth, with advice to the superiors that if the fresh bodies also went unclaimed and started decomposing from the mortuary, the stench would be "too much."

It was now evening, at about 5pm when the hospital administration reluctantly gave nod to one take the decomposing body to the cemetery, 15km away. The driver, sounding as if being burdened by more important errands, said the ambulance was out of fuel but would handle the assignment first thing in the morning after refueling.

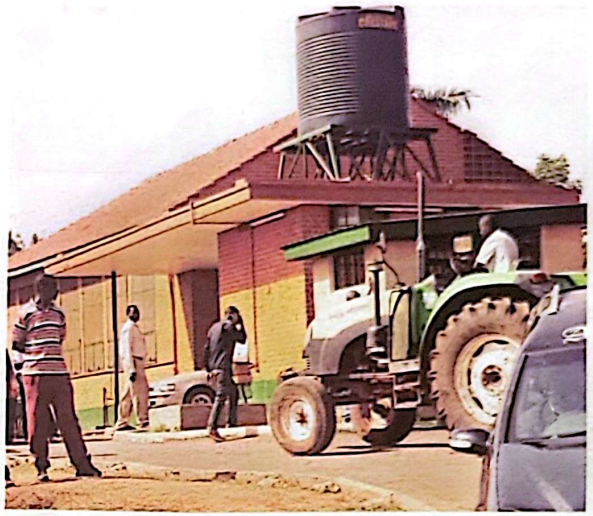
Because it is the responsibility of local authorities to dispose of unclaimed bodies, the hospital administrator further tasked the ambulance driver to claim for fuel from the district. If this is what happens to all unclaimed bodies, the life lesson is that each person deserves to notify one or two people of their whereabouts at all times.

The ambulance driver eventually secured fuel at around 11am on Thursday. But it was better watching from the distance, as the mortuary attendant and his two workers removed the body from the freezer after sprinkling it with paraffin.

The ambulance driver, who did not want his truck stained, had also managed to secure two sisal sacks, which were first steeped in petrol. Not even petrol/paraffin and the assortment of mixed liquid soap could keep the swarm of blue flies away. But the trio, as they usually earn their pay, dressed the body in the sacks and loaded it onto the pick-up truck en route to the cemetery.

All this time the driver was

hospitals, districts



Morgue. City mortuary-Mulago, which is operated by Kampala Capital City Authority. PHOTO BY MICHAEL KAKUMIRIZI

Thankless task. A mortuary worker performs his duty at Moroto hospital. PHOTO BY STEPHEN AMONG

as he cautioned the trio to load the remaining two bodies as well to be buried at once, now that no claimant had shown up, because he won't allow to do "someone else's job".

Burial is another agonising exercise; the driver, who returned after roughly one hour and 15 minutes, had left the duo behind to "earn their pay".

The unenviable job

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And for long these cemeteries served the purpose until gerrymandering set in and land became a hot cake. The insatiable appetite hasn't spared the cemetery land.

"The problem is that many of the cemeteries were located at prime places, so as times changed it become prime land for target," explained Dr Daniel Okello, the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA)'s deputy director of Public Health and Environment.

At City mortuary-Mulago, operated by KCCA, Dr Okello said they handle [dispose-of] at least 10 unclaimed bodies every week and roughly 500 every year. Police pick up bodies from accidents scenes, bars, streets and other places, in Kampala, Wakiso and Mukono.

"Sixty per cent of the bodies we handle are unclaimed but luckily unlike many upcountry districts, we are in position to work within our budget to give them a good send-off. But in places elsewhere I know for a fact that this is very challenging," he added.

KCCA, for example, Dr Okello noted, wraps each body in a back-cloth—which slows down the decomposition process—so that in the event that any claimants step forward, the remains are easily exhumed and taken for decent burial.

The case in Lugazi is worse. The Kawolo hospital administrator, Mr Haruna Wamala, said unclaimed bodies, which are usually accident victims, overwhelm the facility.

"In... festive holidays, we handle as many as 10 unknown bodies yet we are constrained by space in the mortuary, but normally we usually have at least three unclaimed bodies every week," Mr Haruna said. "At times we have to pile them on top of each other as we wait for help."

This help doesn't come that quickly leaving behind a stinking challenge.

Kawolo hospital keeps each unclaimed body for a maximum of three days after which they notify the health inspector at the municipality, who then has to butt heads with the bureaucracy to secure a vehicle and fuel, to pick up the bodies for burial at a cemetery 16km away.

Two bodies swarmed by maggots that wriggled about the floor of the mortuary were overdue for pick-up

Tough job. A mortuary worker cleans a gurney after disposing of a decomposing body at Kawolo hospital mortuary in Lugazi Municipality. PHOTO BY MICHAEL KAKUMIRIZI

Where problem lies

The district health inspector, when contacted referred to this reporter to the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), who was neither in office at the time nor picked/return our repeated calls. The health inspector, however, said it is not possible to put a block figure to how much the district spends on picking up bodies from hospital that serves five districts.

"The hospital calls us every time to pick up the bodies, and as you know this is not one of those enjoyable things to do. And it is not like you pick them [bodies] at once so you save the cost. They can call you like on Monday, and again on Saturday, it's annoying. This is not something budgeted for in our budget, so we have to look for the money from within," the inspector noted.

Last year Moroto hospital, which is one of the overburdened hospitals, mooted selling off unclaimed bodies to universities and other research and training institutions.

Mulago hospital pathologist, Dr Sylvester Onzivua, in a separate interview said the problem is aggravated because local governments don't have budgets for such thing which makes it difficult to even convince them to realise that it's their duty.

"Health workers are not supposed to be burying unclaimed bodies but in some places you find it is the case because local authorities are not concerned," Dr Onzivua said.

Late last year, Lira District officials faced off with police over dumping bodies at their mortuary which go unclaimed and become a burden for them. At the time some five bodies had started decomposing from the facility.

by four days, on the day we visited, and the scene was not for the faint hearted.

Like in eastern Uganda, in Lugazi officials not only struggle to mobilise a vehicle to pick up the bodies, but they cannot get plastic bags in which to wrap the dead—some are buried naked and others in the attires they donned, if at all, at the time of death.

Police's Dr Byaruhanga admits that its true local authorities/councils drag foot on the matter due to financial constraints, because this is not a matter budgeted for, but at the same time says, "They are just not doing their jobs."

There is wide-held belief that some of the unclaimed bodies are used for study purposes in medical institutions in the country but the head of anatomy department at Makerere University, Dr William Buwembo, told this newspaper that "it is true sometimes we use them but the issue is not about scarcity or plenty of them, the biggest problem every hospital is grappling with is how to dispose them of."

In April, patients and health workers deserted Lyantonde Hospital, whose mortuary was constructed in 1955 to accommodate only three bodies but now handles more than 10 per week, over a stench emanating from unclaimed bodies in the mortuary.

At Moroto hospital, the picture is quite grotesque as sometimes the body nearly rots away in the mortuary because there is no burial ground. At Masaka hospital the story is the same.

Problem is, no matter how the subject is discussed the duty of disposing of unclaimed bodies remains a responsibility of local authorities, according to the law, but each one is battling its own problems.

Maybe it is time to amend the law to bring it up to date with current realities. In the research paper titled Report on the review of health policies and laws relevant to the establishment of the health professions authority in Uganda, the authors - Makerere University don Emmanuel Kasimbazi and Dr Paul Kabwa, a health consultant - recommend the same.

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