

WHAT WE NEED TO DO ABOUT...

TRACHOMA

The elimination of blindness caused by trachoma is possible by treating everyone in endemic districts every year, for three to five years, by performing surgery on people with in-turned eyelashes

By Lillian N. Magezi

Communities in East Africa have been urged to maintain proper hygiene and sanitation in order to eliminate trachoma. The call was made at the third annual meeting of the Eastern Africa Trachoma Cross-Border Partnership at Fairway Hotel in Kampala recently.

The meeting brought together delegates from Kenya, Tanzania, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

What is trachoma?

"It is an infectious eye disease caused by bacteria. Trachoma is spread through contact with an infected person and is transmitted by flies, dirty fingers and contaminated cloth, such as a handkerchief or towel used to clean the face," Gilbert Baayenda, the programme officer for Trachoma at the Ministry of Health, explains.

Trachoma is categorised under a group of diseases referred to as the neglected tropical diseases 11 of which are endemic in Uganda. They include bilharzia, elephantiasis, river blindness and intestinal worms. Others are jiggers, kala-azar, sleeping sickness, plague, buruli ulcers and rabies. These diseases usually affect poor people and contribute significantly to sickness, disability and death.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) set the year 2020 as the target for the elimination of neglected tropical diseases worldwide.

Delegates at the conference noted that trachoma is the world's leading cause of preventable infectious blindness.

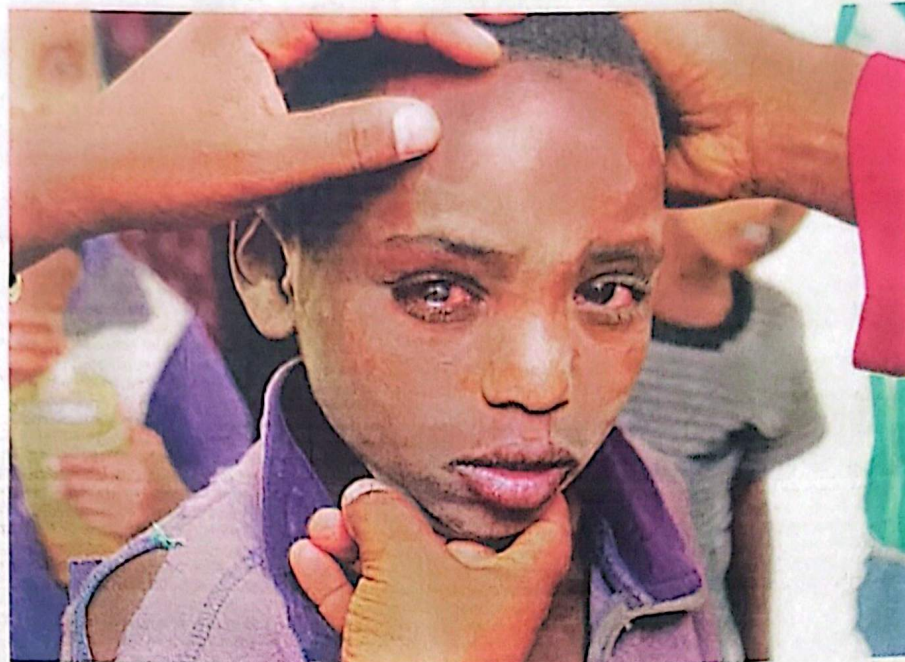
Signs of trachoma

- Swelling of the inner part of the eye
- Eyes becoming red with a discharge
- Having a sandlike sensation and itching in the eyes
- Inflammation of the upper eyelid.
- With repeated infection, the eye lid becomes scarred, which causes it to shorten.
- This causes the eyelashes to turn inward and rub on the eyeball, which in turn causes scarring of the cornea (transparent layer on the front of the eye) and then leads to irreversible blindness.

Treatment and prevention

"Trachoma is treated with antibiotics, to control infection and surgery to correct complications," Dr Edridah Tukahebwa, the assistant commissioner of the vector control division in the health ministry, says. She notes that the elimination of blindness caused by trachoma is possible by treating everyone in endemic districts every year, for three to five years; by performing surgery on people with in-turned eyelashes and improving hygiene and sanitation.

Dr Patrick Turyaguma, the head of the trachoma control/elimination programme in the health ministry, noted that all individuals in endemic districts receive free drugs annually during the mass drug administration exercise, which takes place in October. Information from the health ministry shows that since 2007, more than 12.8 million people have received treatment for trachoma. In addition, about 20,000 surgeries have been done to prevent



A child suffering from trachoma. Facial hygiene and water access could prevent trachoma

WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE

Countries were reminded at the third annual meeting of the Eastern Africa Trachoma Cross-Border Partnership at Fairway Hotel in Kampala recently that they have only three years left to totally eliminate trachoma as per the WHO target of elimination by 2020. In that regard, delegates at the meeting urged member countries to scale up their WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) programmes in order to completely eliminate trachoma.

During the discussions, it was noted that although mass drug administration and surgery are important in the fight against trachoma, total elimination cannot be achieved and sustained without communities putting emphasis on proper hygiene (personal and environment) and sanitation practices. Such practices are expected to contribute to the prevention of the disease and subsequently, lead to their total elimination.

They include:

- Facial cleanliness: Participants noted that keeping one's face clean through washing it with clean water and soap helps to prevent flies that spread trachoma from one person to another. Flies are always attracted to discharges from the eyes, nose and ears, in addition to dirt on the face.
- Avoid handkerchiefs or any other cloth used to clean the face
- Keep your hands clean and free of germs, for example, by washing them after visiting the toilet
- Ensure proper environmental hygiene by keeping homesteads clean, so as to avoid attracting flies
- Use latrines and do not practise open defecation because faeces attract flies. Those without latrines are urged to construct them

Washing hands is one of the best ways of fighting trachoma. This practice should be reinforced in schools and at the community level



blindness.

Tukahebwa urged anyone experiencing the symptoms of the disease to seek treatment early, noting that although trachoma is treatable, it becomes increasingly complex to treat in more advanced stages.

CHALLENGES TO ELIMINATING TRACHOMA

Refugees and cross-border issues

Delegates at the meeting noted that it will be difficult for any country to eliminate trachoma, if its neighbours have trachoma on the border. This is because people keep on moving across borders due to instability

at home. For example, South Sudan refugees. Others enter searching for water and pasture for their animals during the dry season, like the Turkana of Kenya who move into the Karamoja region in Uganda).

In this regard, countries were advised to plan for refugees and have them treated during the mass drug administration exercises.

FACT FILE

With trachoma endemic in only nine districts, delegates commended Uganda for making tremendous progress towards eliminating and fighting the neglected tropical diseases in general.

In a recent interview, Dr Edridah Tukahebwa, the assistant commissioner of the vector control division in the health ministry, disclosed that in Uganda, trachoma used to be endemic in 37 districts, especially in the Karamoja and Busoga regions. In addition, there were cases recorded in Acholi, some parts of West Nile, Lango and Bunyoro. However, she added that through mass treatment with drugs and surgery camps, the disease has been eliminated in 28 districts and the ministry is no longer conducting mass treatment exercises in those places.

In addition, surgeries had been carried out in 17 districts in Karamoja and Busoga regions. Out of the 17 districts, 10 have attained the surgery target and surgery campaigns have been stopped there.

Information from the health ministry shows that about 47,000 people are blind due to trachoma and 250,000 are at risk of becoming blind.

Tukahebwa also noted that in Uganda, over 900,000 children under 10 years have the disease and 10 million people are at the risk of acquiring it if measures are not taken to prevent it.

Among adults, women are more affected than men because they are usually the caregivers of the infected children, so they are more exposed to infections.



A trachoma infected eyelid. It is important to keep clean to control the infection's spread