

Breakthrough: Uganda treats 11 abnormal heartbeats

By Pascal Kwesiga

Godfrey Owiny, 59, was marking Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education exams in 2011 when he collapsed inside a Uganda National Examinations Board marking room in Kyambogo, Kampala.

He had not presented any signs of ill-health and his collapse threw his fellow examiners in the room into a panic. With his heart palpitating, Owiny, who lost consciousness briefly after the collapse, was helped into a vehicle and rushed to Nsambya Hospital.

Abnormal heartbeat

He had no history of heart disease, however, he was diagnosed with a life-threatening heart condition – abnormal heartbeat – which constitutes 25% of the heart disease burden in Uganda.

"I was shocked when the doctors at Nsambya told me I

had a heart disease. Another doctor told me my condition was so bad that I would die anytime," Owiny said.

For seven years, Owiny visited a number of health facilities, but medics were only monitoring his condition. He had failed to raise \$20,000 (sh72m) to travel to India for treatment.

Recently, Owiny received a call from Dr Joselyn Rwebembera, a cardiologist at Uganda Heart Institute (UHI) inviting him to the health facility for treatment.

"I thank God and the Government for treating me. I am now fine," Owiny said.

He is one of the 11 people who UHI says have been successfully treated for irregular heartbeats.

"On April 3, for the first time in Uganda, the UHI was able to carry out new procedures for diagnosing life-threatening irregular heartbeats known as Electrophysiology Study (EPS)

and its treatment known as Radiofrequency Ablation," Dr Jane Aceng, the health minister told journalists at the ministry headquarters in Kampala yesterday.

Causes

The procedures were carried out by Ugandan medics at UHI led by Dr Rwebembera. The minister said Rwebembera is so far the only Ugandan who had specialised in diagnosis and treatment of the fatal irregular heartbeat condition. She was sponsored by the Medtronic Foundation for specialised training.

One is declared to be suffering from an abnormal heartbeat condition if their heart beats so fast, slow or irregularly. A normal heart, according to medics, beats 50 to 100 times per minute.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Several factors, according to doctors, can be responsible for irregular heartbeats including blocked arteries, electrolyte imbalances in blood, changes in heart muscles and injuries from heart attacks.

electrolyte imbalances in blood, changes in heart muscles and injuries from heart attacks. The condition can manifest itself through among others, difficulty in breathing and fast heartbeats not triggered by any vigorous activity. Aceng explained that abnormal heartbeats can result in death if they are not stopped immediately.

"Doctors from UHI had been monitoring me since I was diagnosed in 2013. I do not even know how I was selected to

benefit from this arrangement," Ratibu Kiyimba, a student at Makerere University Business School, said.

Treatment

According to the health ministry, treatment of the condition involves using high frequency waves directing heat to the part of the heart responsible for the abnormal heart rhythm. The condition can be treated without opening the chest.

"During electrophysiology studies, various specialised wires are inserted into blood vessels in the groin and advanced up into the heart with the visual aid of special X-ray cameras. These wires pick up signals and patterns of electricity flow from different parts of the heart," Aceng said.

Cost

The UHI executive director, Dr John Omagino, said the each procedure would have cost

\$20,000 (sh72m) in India, but only about \$5,000 (sh18m) was spent on each patient.

Initially, he explained, UHI had identified 13 patients to undergo the procedures, but two were dropped after it was established that their treatment required more advanced machines.

"We shall treat the two as soon as we have the machines required. The patients were selected from those we had been monitoring," he said. Omagino said UHI gets about sh4.5b in funding (non-wage) each financial year and spends sh18m on each heart operation. With sh4.5b, Omagino said UHI can only perform about 240 heart surgeries, yet it has capacity to undertake 1,000.

"We are able to do about 600 surgeries with additional money in form of user fees from patients and donations of medical commodities. We are not operating at full capacity because of limited funds.