

'A waste disposal plant should be set over five kilometres from the nearest residential area'

By George Bita

Black smoke billows out of the medical waste management plant surrounded by residential quarters in Iganga district. The accompanying stench makes many locals hold their noses as soon as the incineration kicks off.

Workers dressed in green overalls wear smoke masks as they go about their duties on the premises.

Alfred Ssajabi, a resident in the neighbourhood, laments about the irritating odour, saying it has made their lives miserable.

"Our eyes are usually red and we are sometimes mistaken for drunkards, yet the cause is the smoke that comes out of the waste plant," Ssajabi says.

Occasionally, trucks leave and return to the plant, heavily laden with waste that is subsequently burnt.

Genesis of the plant

According to Dr David Muwanguzi, the Iganga district health officer, with one general hospital and 17 health centres, the Local Government generates a large quantity of waste every month.

"This poses a health risk to the population, as most of the medical waste is hazardous. We are talking about needles, syringes, amputated human flesh, placentas and so on," Muwanguzi reveals.

He says a private company called Green Label recently set up the waste management facility to assist in ferrying waste from health facilities.

A sales agreement accessed at the local council office shows that Green Label acquired the eight-acre piece of land at sh60m.

"Under an arrangement with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the company's trucks clear waste from local health centres. They have been contracted to remove all the refuse and burn it at their plant," Muwanguzi says.

Iganga medical waste plant a health hazard



Potentially hazardous waste ready for collection at Iganga Hospital. The waste is taken to the plant to be incinerated



A child rides a bicycle past the waste plant. The facility was built too close to homes

Current status

Muwanguzi believes that in this era of diseases, such as Hepatitis B and HIV/AIDS, medical waste should be properly disposed of.

"The earlier it is safely disposed of, the better. Otherwise, it can lead to avoidable reinfections," he warns.

Dr Grace Mugume of Green

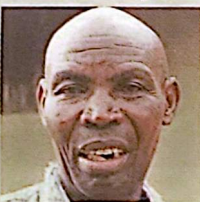
Label says the service offered to Iganga health facilities is commendable.

WHAT RESIDENTS SAY

Yes, the plant is useful for waste management, but...



Aisha Nangobi, resident of Lwawu parish
We are excited that a waste plant was built to help clean up Iganga. In the same spirit, let something be done about the offensive smoke it gives off.



Steven Mukungu, resident of Bulwoza village
I am delighted that my locality is being cleaned up. Let the district authorities ensure that we have more of such waste-removing arrangements in place. It will save us.



Rebecca Mwebaza, resident of CMS trading centre
The waste plant should have been set up far from residential areas. Trash and people are not supposed to be placed together.

Dangers of inhaling medical waste fumes

Muwanguzi says that long-term exposure to airborne pathogens can drastically affect the body.

"Ammonia, for example, can be released from burning organic matter. It irritates the eyes, skin and respiratory system, causing lung disease," he says.

Muwanguzi adds that waste incineration produces gaseous sulphur compounds, which, if inhaled in large amounts, compromise energy production in the brain, heart and kidneys.

Abdul Samanya, Iganga district's senior environment officer, says 40% of the waste from health centres nationwide is hazardous.

"Such refuse has to be disposed of effectively to prevent harm to humans. Conventionally, a waste disposal plant should be set up over five kilometres from the nearest residential area," Samanya notes.

He says improper healthcare waste disposal poses a risk for handlers and the community, especially if the hazardous waste is burnt improperly.

SAFER ALTERNATIVES

■ The United Nations has, through a human rights report, previously called for the replacement of incineration as a disposal method of hazardous medical waste with more environmentally-friendly and safe methods of disposal.

Dr Peter Waiswa, a principal investigator at Makerere University School of Public Health, argues that medical waste can be either infectious or non-infectious.

"It possesses micro-organisms, which, if not handled well, can invade new body tissues. They can cause disease or health complications to those who come into contact with the pathogens," Waiswa cautions.

Way forward

Balunywa advises that a tall chimney can be built at the waste plant to keep the potentially hazardous smoke away from the neighbours.

"I think the locals need to be sensitised about the importance of the plant. Once they appreciate the dangers of the hazardous material going up with the smoke, a lot would be achieved," he advises.

Muwanguzi urges all health centres in the area to utilise the waste removal arrangement to keep residents safe.

"Gone are the days when medical waste was dumped in dustbins. Let us use the hazardous waste removal option to save people's lives," he implores.

"I do not have the exact figures of how much we collect, as that will require checking records at our Kamwokya offices in Kampala. But there are no more cases of littered medical waste in Iganga district," he says.

Dr Stephen Waako, a medical superintendent at Iganga Hospital, reveals that the medical waste is stuffed in special polythene bags for collection.

"Designated areas have been set aside as pick-up points for the waste. Once a truck comes in, the driver and loaders know where to load from," Waako says.

"The plant is opposite Dawn Primary School, three kilometres to Iganga town from Jinja."

Patrick Kayemba, the district chairman, says the plant was approved by the previous administration.

"I am told those people (Green Label) came in as investors and were given a go-ahead to set up the plant. They even presented an Environment Impact Assessment report to the authorities," Kayemba said.

Abdullah Balunywa, the Bulamagi sub-county LC5

chief, argues that whereas the plant is solving a problem, it appears to be creating others.

"I received complaints from neighbours that the plant is making their lives miserable. Some have opted to relocate due to the pollution," Balunywa reveals.

Who approved the plan?

Iganga Municipality mayor, David Balaba, says the area falls outside the municipality's jurisdiction.

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