

Babies dying due to oxygen shortage at Kawempe Hospital

By Gloria Nakajubi

For a 59-year-old first-time mother, the news that two of her three babies that had been delivered had died, was heartbreaking.

Magdalene Namakula, a resident of Mubende district, is only hoping that her remaining child survives.

After successful surgery on Thursday at Kawempe-Mulago Hospital, all seemed well until she woke up to the news that two of her babies were dead after oxygen ran out.

Every day, the special care unit where the two premature babies were being cared for registers a number of deaths due to insufficient oxygen.

On average, the special care unit houses a total of 80 babies and of these, according to a source at the ward, 25 are dependent on oxygen.

Enock Kusasira, the Mulago Hospital spokesperson, said there was an hour's interruption of production at the oxygen plant at Mulago on Thursday, which jeopardised supply.

"An hour of no production means



Mothers check on their babies who are on oxygen in the special care unit of Kawempe-Mulago Hospital. Only one cylinder in the unit had oxygen at the time the photo was taken on Thursday.
Photo by Catherine Mwesigwa

filling the cylinders will be delayed which affects delivery," he said.

Kusasira added that this had since been rectified.

Mismanagement

A source at Mulago Hospital, who

spoke on condition of anonymity, however, expressed fear that the problem was due to mismanagement.

Sources said the plant which generates in excess of sh90m a month from the sale of oxygen to private facilities has been turned into a

business. The source said the hospital has two oxygen plants. One is fully operational while the second one is undergoing repairs. Sources said even Mulago Hospital experiences an inadequate supply of oxygen.

Sources said the problem was

likely that priority was being given to private health facilities and profit-generating units at the hospital where patients pay money for services.

Allegations refuted

Kusasira denied the allegations saying: "There is nothing of the sort happening that I know of. Even if it was happening, it would be illegal."

In 2014, when there was increasing controversy over oxygen availability at Mulago Hospital, the then Minister of Health and now the current Prime Minister, Ruhakana Rugunda, was quoted saying: "On top of a technical staffer attached to the plant 24 hours a day to ensure full functionality, the hospital has a 10-year maintenance contract with the firm that supplied the oxygen plant."

The plant that was installed in 2012 produces about 1,000 litres of oxygen per minute daily.

Kawempe medics say they need on average 14 cylinders per day but sometimes they receive much less, endangering patients' lives.