Cultural beliefs deter fight against anthrax

Data from the March 2 situation report shows five people cases admitted to health facilities and 12 under home-based care, while six have died in Lyantonde.

BY AMBROSE MUSASIZI

As the anthrax outbreak in Lyantonde District enters its third month, cultural beliefs are emerging as a significant barrier to effective control measures, complicating efforts to curb the spread of the deadly zoonotic disease.

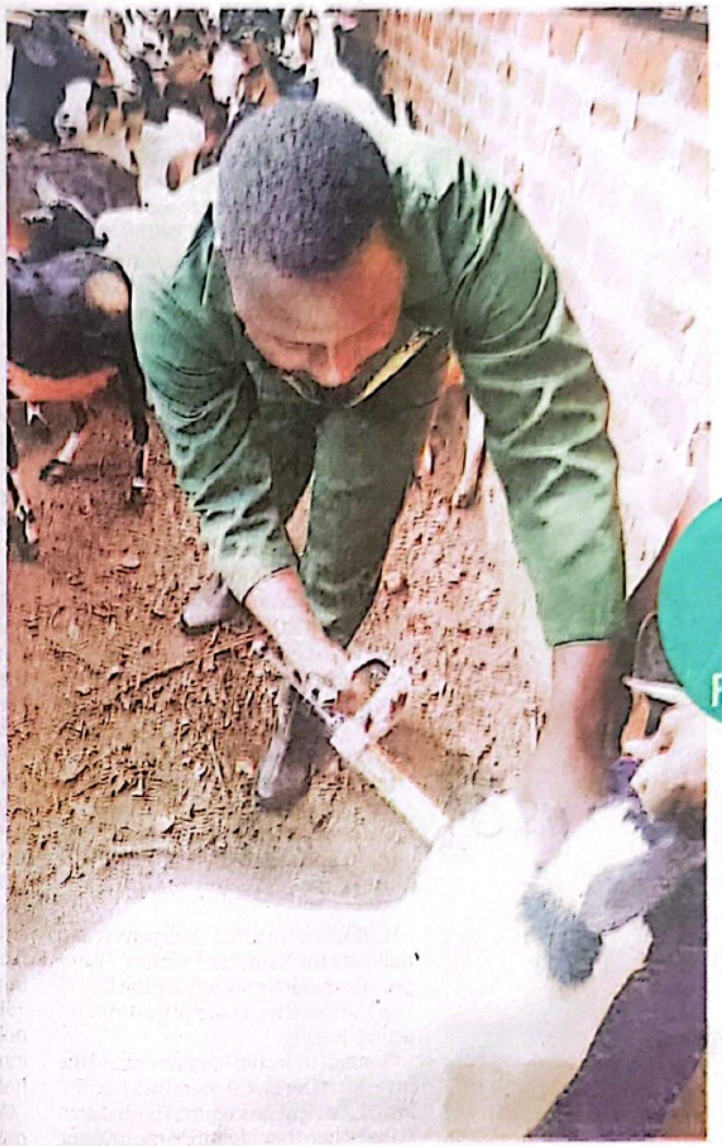
Since January, the outbreak has resulted in six human deaths and 137 animal fatalities, with Kasagama remaining the hardest hit sub-county. District officials report that traditional practices, including resistance to burying or burning infected carcasses and reliance on herbal remedies over medical treatment, are fuelling transmission.

Anthrax is caused by a bacteria known as Bacillus anthracis. Humans generally acquire the disease directly or indirectly from infected animals or occupational exposure to affected or contaminated animal products.

Cumulative data from the March 2 situation report shows five confirmed human cases admitted to health facilities and 12 suspected cases under home-based care, alongside six confirmed deaths.

Dr Ronald Bameka, the Lyantonde District veterinary officer, highlighted the role of cultural hurdles in his latest report to the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF).

"We have managed to bury 12 carcasses in different areas, though with big challenges," he noted, pointing to beliefs that discourage proper disposal and incidents of unearthing buried remains.



A veterinary doctor vaccinates a goat. Experts say that practices such as seeing anthrax as witchcraft have made the fight against anthrax tough. PHOTO/AMBROSE MUSASIZI

On the government's recent vaccine dispatch, he noted: "This intervention will significantly reduce the risk of further infections and protect both animals and the community."

Vaccination progress remains limited against the at-risk population of 120,000 cattle, 60,000 goats and sheep, and 10,000 pigs. Only 10,000 doses provided by MAAIF, supplemented by 5,000 farmer-procured ones, vaccinating 16,500 animals to date (13,000 cattle, 3,500 goats and sheep).

Dr Bameka urged farmers to procure additional vaccines for their livestock, stating, "The 10,000 doses provided by the government are like a drop in the ocean. We urge farmers to liaise with their sub-county veterinary officers to procure their own vaccines since they are available between Shs50,000 and Shs70,000 and vaccination is done in partnership with the agriculture ministry officials."

Dr Moses Nkanika, the Lyantonde District Health Officer, linked human cases to handling suddenly deceased animals, often tied to low risk perception and cultural associations with witchcraft. He emphasised early intervention, saying, "Most cases can be managed at our health facilities, especially when patients report early. Delayed treatment increases the risk of death."

137 ANIMAL FATALITIES

He cautioned against consuming uninspected meat and commended multi-sectoral coordination, noting that four deaths were reported by mid-February, with two cases under treatment at Kasagama Health Centre III.

Lyantonde Resident District Commissioner, David Nkoojo, has called for community cooperation to overcome these barriers, stressing the enforcement of public health guidelines.

He advocated for strict measures for handling dead animals, aligning with district efforts to address cultural resistance.

Fred Muhangi, the Lyantonde District chairperson, echoed the need for capacity building and law enforcement to counter beliefs hindering carcass disposal and vaccination.

According to Dr Bameka, other district efforts and responses include task force meetings, community sensitisation in four sub-counties, radio campaigns, and veterinary measures like closing five unhygienic butcheries and banning dead carcass trade.

As anthrax spores persist in soil for decades, experts warn that without addressing cultural beliefs such as viewing the disease as witchcraft or preferring herbs, containment will remain elusive.

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