

**THE BIG SPEAK**

Although it may look like just an assembly of metal, the delivery bed is a site for the start of a new life. Daniel Edyegu explains how its quality could save or kill

# A faulty delivery bed could be your death

Her birth was drawing painfully close. An hour had sped past midnight. Just then, Esther Nekesa, 27, witnessed a gory scene at Masindi Hospital, where she was waiting to deliver her first child on March 3, 2015.

"A mother at the maternity ward was hissing in unbearable pain. She quickly made for the delivery room, but before she reached the door to the room, the baby came out and fell on the concrete floor. Nurses helped her onto the delivery bed and tried to resuscitate the baby. But it was too late. It died," Nekesa recalls.

If there were any doubts in her mind on the relevance of being in the right place at the right time during such moments, they were now banished.

"The sight paralysed me. However, I gathered some strength, knowing that it could have been me. I was not going to allow such a thing to happen to me, too. I did not wait for my labour pains to intensify. I climbed the delivery bed and gave birth normally at 1:30am. It was a baby boy," Nekesa narrates.

**What's with a delivery bed?**

Does the quality of a delivery bed matter to a mother or midwife? What level of hygiene is required? What is the type and state of delivery beds in public health units? These and a train of other questions are vital when it comes to delivery beds.

To a mother in labour though, these questions mean nothing. To her, what matters is to deliver safely. Period.

"During that moment, the pain will dull all your inquisitive senses! The only thing in mind is to deliver. I have two children – the first-born was delivered in a public health unit, while the second-born, a girl, was delivered in a private hospital in Mbale municipality. I liked the delivery bed and room for the second delivery. There was only one delivery bed in a self-contained room that guaranteed privacy. The cost was high though," Nekesa says.

At Kibuku Health Centre IV in Kibuku district, there are two delivery beds. Winnie Naholo, a midwife at the health centre, says the beds were convenient to work with when they were delivered three years ago.

Over the years, however, Naholo says the beds have become rigid and difficult to use. The gear lever to lower and raise the headrest on the beds no longer work, while the lower slide of the mattress, underneath the top mattress, no longer slides in and out.

"A good delivery bed must



A mother lulls her newborn baby at Kachumbala Health Centre III in Bukedea district. Many health centre III units have only one delivery bed, instead of the required two. Photos by Daniel Edyegu

## Cost of delivery beds and statistics

"A standard delivery bed can cost sh4.5m. This is the type that is flexible enough to serve mothers with disabilities, as well. There are also those of sh1.5m. Depending on the usage, changing these beds after every four years is recommended. But this has a cost implication and resources are always limited," Dr Ahmed Bumba, the Kibuku district health officer, explains.

According to the health sector development plan 2015-2020, Uganda has a total of 1,289 health centre III units, 197 health centre IV units, 144 general hospitals, 14 regional referral hospitals and two national referral hospitals – Mulago and Butabika. Going by the national structure, Bumba says each health centre III is supposed to have two delivery beds, while each health centre IV is supposed to have three delivery beds. A general



A delivery bed with a worn-out mackintosh at Laloگو Health Centre in Gulu district. Such a bed poses a risk of bacterial infections to mothers and babies

and referral hospital, Bumba says, can have six to eight delivery beds.

This implies that on average, the country must have about 4,147 delivery beds for the health units to function optimally. This number, however, might be currently less by about a half.

be flexible. A midwife should be able to raise and lower the level of the bed to their height for purposes of convenience. The mackintosh (waterproof covering for the mattress on the delivery bed) must be clean and intact. There must be a functional fixed basin at the lower end for placenta and other body fluids," Naholo explains.

"The metallic side bars of one of our beds broke. During delivery, a mother is always in excruciating pain and unrest.

The metallic bars prevent the mother from rolling off the bed," she notes.

To keep the mackintosh clean, Naholo says each mother is required to carry a clean polythene sheet that is spread on top of the delivery bed. The surface is cleaned, nonetheless, after the delivery.

Even amidst intense labour pains, some pregnant mothers mind the state and quality of delivery beds. Such is the case with Miria Akoromit, 32, a mother two from Kachumbala

sub-county in Bukedea district. When she delivered her first child at Kachumbala Health Centre III in 2013, the sight of the then delivery bed was repulsive.

"The bed was the only one in a cramped room. The surface was worn-out. I only put up with the situation because this was the nearest health centre and I could not afford a better place," Akoromit narrates.

Both as a researcher and lead implementer of occasional

maternal health schemes in Uganda, Dr Elizabeth Ekirapa Kiracho, a senior lecturer at Makerere School of Public Health, has encountered worse scenarios at the numerous public health units she has been to across the country.

**State of delivery beds**  
While the Government has increasingly invested in ensuring availability of human resource and infrastructure to cater for maternal health, Ekirapa says a lot still needs to be done in terms of delivery beds.

"A mother could deliver from anywhere – the bush or the roadside, but the purpose of the delivery bed is to provide comfort to both the mother and midwife during the delivery process. However, in many health units, the delivery beds are old and not flexible. If it is stuck at a lower level, for instance, it means a midwife who uses such a bed is likely to have back problems due to bending too long."

"In some health centres, the mackintosh is worn out. Mothers are required to come along with polythene sheets to spread on the surface during delivery. But others, especially in the rural areas, may not be able to afford it. So, the baby is delivered on a bare surface of a worn-out bed, in whose sponge blood and other bodily fluids have been sipping through. This exposes mothers and newborn babies to bacterial infections," Ekirapa adds.

To add salt to the wound, Ekirapa says most delivery beds in public health units are not tailored to cater for the mothers with physical

**VIEWS**

More than just a bed



**Julia Jenkins, midwife in Wales**  
It is not just a delivery bed; it is the dignity of a mother. A good delivery room gives the mother a sense of dignity.



**Maria Akoromit, mother from Kachumbala**  
Our spouses should escort us for antenatal visits to ascertain where we are to deliver from and ensure something is done to improve the beds.

disabilities. They cannot climb the beds, so they have to be carried. This, she says, deters many such women from delivering in health centres, yet they are high-risk mothers.

For purposes of enabling routine maintenance to reduce mechanical faults and damage to the delivery beds, Ekirapa suggests that standard delivery ones should be procured locally. "I often see faulty delivery beds piled at some corners of health units. Usually, the mechanical fault could be very small, but because the beds are imported, local artisans have limited knowledge on their repairs. Supplying standard locally-made beds would ensure that they are routinely checked and repaired," Ekirapa observes.

**Improvisation**  
In the face of shortfalls, health centres have learnt to improvise. Until last year, Kadama health centre III in Kibuku district did not have a delivery bed.

Immaculate Mudhanga, the health in-charge of the unit, explains that they had to use an ordinary bed for delivery.

"We used the ordinary bed for five years. It was uncomfortable because it was low. The delivery bed we got last year is standard and perfect for job. It even has a side locker for storing materials to be used during delivery," Mudhanga notes.

It may look like just an assembly of metal and equipment, but the delivery bed is the spot for the start of a new life and, therefore, its quality should not be compromised.