

THE BIG TALK

Even with the human resource gap in the area of neurosurgery in Uganda, Mulago has taken the complex task by the horns. Agnes Kyotalengeire talked to Dr Michael Muhumuza, the senior consultant neurosurgeon at Mulago Hospital about how they have handled the human resource challenge to provide quality treatment to the patients who visit the hospital

Mulago conducts complex brain, spine tumour surgery

Dressed in a white undershirt with bandages wrapped around his head, he steadily walks into the doctor's room, to inquire about his discharge forms. This prompts the doctor to ask how he was progressing. "Actually, I feel much better than I have felt in the last three weeks. I am able to walk unsupported," says Yostia Mubiru, 48.

Seeing the cheerful and rather energetic man move about normally, it is hard to believe that just four days earlier, Mubiru had undergone one of the most complex surgeries to remove a tumour from his brain. The resident of Entebbe had developed the tumour following an attack on him about three weeks earlier. "Suddenly after the attack, I felt like a tremor go through my hand then it started shaking. I rushed to Kisubi Hospital, where my blood pressure was checked and found to be abnormally high. The most frightening thing was the way my hand was shaking. I thought I would get a stroke. The doctor suggested I do a CT-Scan. The results indicated I had a tumour in the brain and I was advised to have surgery immediately," recounts Mubiru, a cartographer with the energy ministry.

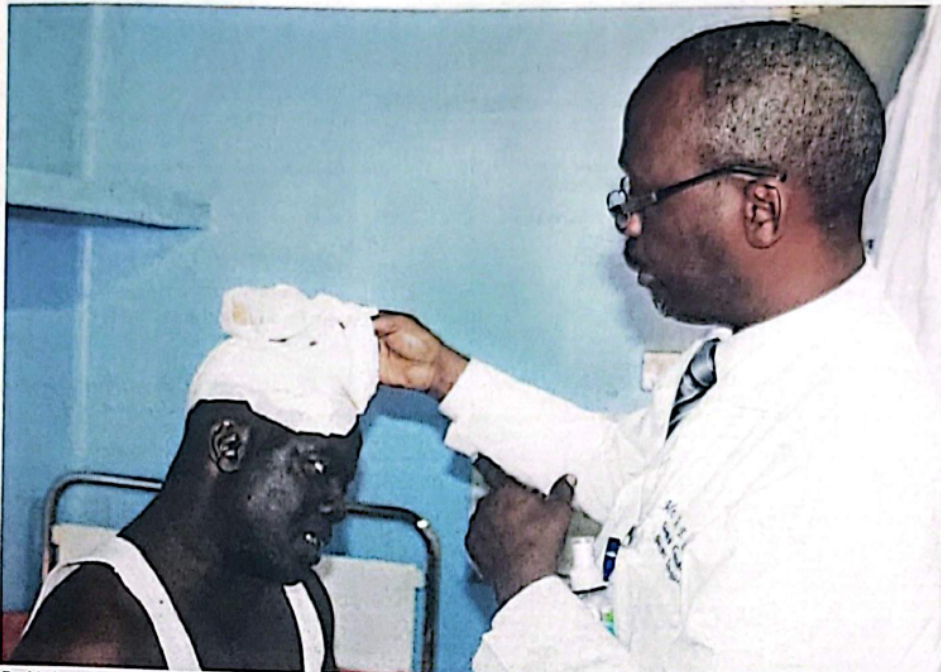
A computed tomography, more commonly known as CT scan, is a diagnostic medical test that, like traditional x-rays, produces multiple images or pictures of the inside of the body.

Mubiru was among the 10 patients who benefited from the recent neurosurgical camp at Mulago Hospital. Of the 10, eight patients had successful brain tumour surgery and two underwent spinal tumour surgery.

"We have held several neurosurgical camps before, but this was unique. We successfully operated upon complex brain surgeries," Dr Michael Muhumuza, the senior consultant neurosurgeon at Mulago Hospital, said.

Highlighting on the complexity of the surgeries, Muhumuza cited a case of Fraser Drakua, 49, who had a big tumour measuring up to the size of a fist. The tumour was positioned near sensitive area, the speech centre. "It was a lengthy surgery lasting 10 hours (from 8:00am to 6:00pm) he said.

According to Dr Muhumuza, the three day free neurosurgical camp was conducted by a team of neurosurgeons from Mulago Hospital



Dr Muhumuza reviewing Mubiru who had undergone brain tumour surgery before discharging him

together with a visiting senior consultant and the head of neurosurgery, Anandh Balasubramaniam, plus a senior anaesthetist, Dr Nitin Manohar from Yashoda Hospital based in Hyderabad, India.

He said the surgical camp focused on capacity building for Ugandan neurosurgeons and also as a progress assessment for neurosurgery students who have been trained at Yashoda Hospital in India.

"We partnered with friends in India, where we send our students for three month of training. So, this time round, the expert was following up on them, but also the neurosurgeons benefited," Muhumuza explained.

He said although they screened 35 patients with brain and spinal tumours, they could only work on 10 patients due to shortage of high technology equipment and lack of an Intensive Care Unit. He is optimistic that with the opening of the renovated

Cost of surgeries

During the camp, the surgeries were done for free. However, Muhumuza estimates that in India, brain and spine surgery may cost between \$6,000 and \$10,000 (about sh21.6m and sh36m). In Nairobi, the surgery costs about \$10,000 (about sh36m). He said in Mulago Hospital's private wing, a patient may pay not less than \$5,000 (about sh18m) for the surgery. It includes the cost of specialised sundries, accommodation, ICU and medicines.

Patrick Kato, 32, who had a brain tumour for two years is grateful to Mulago Hospital: "I had lost hope because I could not afford to pay for surgery," he says.

According to Kato, the disease had taken a toll on him. He had a constant headache and had developed poor vision.

Mulago Hospital next year, they will conduct more surgeries.

He said the surgical camps will be conducted annually, but they plan to increase the frequency to three or four times a year.

The principal administrator of Mulago Hospital, David Nuwamanya, said

conducting surgery for such complicated cases of tumours in a resource-constrained environment is a big achievement for the hospital.

Hospital battling with many head injury cases
Dr Muhumuza estimated that on average, Mulago Hospital receives about 10 patients

with head injuries involved in boda boda accidents. This, according to Muhumuza, results into brain tumours.

The country is grappling with human resource gaps in neurosurgery. Currently, there are only four neurosurgeons at Mulago Hospital. However, Muhumuza says the numbers will soon increase as two of the students are sitting their final exams. That aside, three students enrolled for the course, this year.

What are brain and spinal tumours?

A brain tumour is a collection or a mass of abnormal cells in the brain. Brain tumours can be cancerous (malignant) or non-cancerous (benign).

Spinal tumours are in most cases non-cancerous and usually begin from the supporting cells within the spinal cord.

What causes tumours

Although the cause of tumours is not known, Muhumuza thinks one of

STATISTICS

Dr. Muhumuza says in a population of 1,000 people, about two to three people have either brain or spinal tumours. Similarly, at Mulago hospital, he estimates, on average in a month, they receive about three patients with tumours. He says the number of people presenting with tumours has not increased, but because the radiology services are being extended to upcountry health facilities, patients are able to access the CT scans, as opposed to the past, where they had to rely on Mulago Hospital only.

the things that is obvious is unnecessary exposure to radiation from X-rays. Additionally, one's chances of developing tumours increase with a history of a family member having suffered from tumours, he affirms.

Signs and symptoms

Muhumuza says a patient with a brain tumour presents with headaches, which gradually become frequent and more severe, forceful vomiting and nausea resulting from increased pressure in the brain, gradual loss in sensation and movement in a leg or arm, difficulty in balance, confusion and personal or behaviour changes. Seizures especially in someone with no history of them is another sign.

Additionally, telltale signs of spinal tumours include back pain which sometimes radiates to other parts of the body. Loss of sensation, especially in the arms or legs. Difficulty in walking, sometimes leading to falls and reduced sensitivity to pain, heat and cold. Loss of bowel and bladder function.

Herbert Mukasa, who is recovering from spinal tumour surgery, testifies that his health started deteriorating two months ago. He was experiencing paralysis in the legs. Later, he could neither control stool nor urine and his bones and back muscles would hurt.