

Nation without Blood



YEAR 400

Increase. The units of blood needed at Mulago hospital on a daily basis.

Agony as blood shortage hits crisis levels

No end in sight. As acute blood shortage in the country persists, **Sheila Nduhukire** brings tales of despair and agony as many patients stare at agonising death.

Mourners dig gashes of black loam soil in the deeper recesses of Namisambya Village in Kamuli District. They are here to lay to rest their son, Stuart Tabusibwa.

At a tender age of 19, the life of Tabusibwa, a Senior Six leaver at Busoga High School, came to a grinding halt as a result of an acute blood shortage in Kiruddu General Referral Hospital on January 30, 2018.

He had been hospitalised for three days with leukaemia. Kiruddu hospital declined our request for an interview about his death.

"My brother was losing a lot of blood. He would have lived had there been enough blood in the hospital. Unfortunately, by the time we got our first pint of blood, it was already too late," Pheona Nakasero, a sister to the deceased, recounts.

"We feel sorry for the family that their loved one as they were still fighting for blood to save him. They had their relatives, who were O negative. Unfortunately, when a person came, he was O positive. We called three of our donors and they came and donated blood," Mr Micheal Mukundane, the district Blood Transfusion services spokesperson.

despair
When we first met Ms Sandra Poni, widow of the deceased's family at the Nakasero Blood Bank in Kampala, she was an ejected figure as she roamed the corridors of the blood bank. She had been on the phone since 2am for a potential blood donor for Tabusibwa's life.

"I and two of her friends had been waiting at the blood bank because the hospital did not have the type of blood our patient needed.

The doctor told us that if in 24 hours we've not found the blood, our son will not survive because his blood level is very low," she said.

"I had been waiting at the blood bank for 3 hours for only four units of blood equivalent to two litres."

"We went to Kiruddu hospital but the hospital sent us here. They said we are better off coming and waiting from the blood bank because the hospital did not have any blood," said Ms Poni, fighting back tears.

"The blood was tested and issued out to Kiruddu hospital to be administered on the patient. I don't know at what time the patient passed on but they had already received the blood. The delay in the delivery of this blood could have contributed but the delay of blood is not in itself alone the cause of death because they were treating other ailments, which could have also worsened," Mr Mukundane says.

Whereas a normal haemoglobin count for men is 13.5 grammes per decilitre, Stuart's haemoglobin count was two, a very critical level that the family still hoped would be reversed.

Unfortunately for Tabusibwa, he needed blood O negative, which is very rare. After numerous calls and several well-wishers, they only walked away with two litres.

The only means of transport they had were two motorcycles to transport the blood for a distance of 11kms. They set out on the journey, hoping that the litre of blood would offer a reprieve.

Shs144,000

Cost. The amount needed to deliver a unit of blood to a patient. This means that for every two litres of blood that a patient gets, the blood bank will have spent at least \$160 (about Shs500,000).

While the recommended procedure to transport blood is using properly equipped ambulances or recognised vehicles, this is not usually the case for the ailing health sector fraught with underfunding.

Also found camped at the blood bank was Goretti Nankya, who urgently needed blood for her aunt, a situation which underpins the crisis across the country.



Scarcity. Pints of blood at the Nakasero Blood Bank in Kampala. PHOTOS BY RACHEL MABALA & SHEILA NDUHUKIRE

"I have come back but they have told me they don't have any yet. I'm not sure she will make it through the night. I was sent away and told to come back tomorrow but I have no hope left," Ms Nankya said.

Risky option

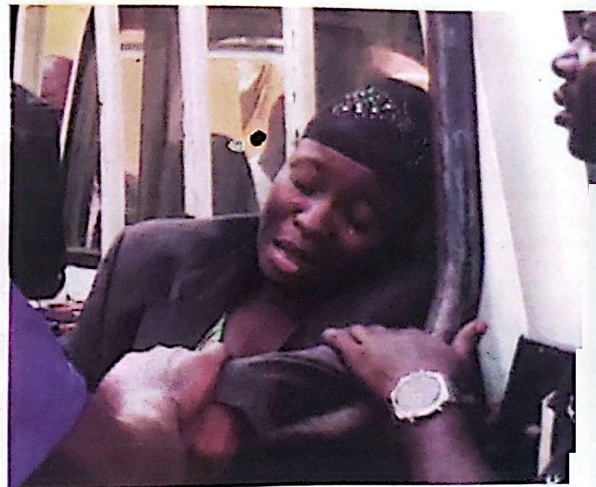
Those fortunate to live another day have resorted to other means of survival. In the verdant slopes and undulating moors of Bundibugyo District, the community in this remote backwater has resorted to scientifically unproven methods as a panacea to the blood shortage. They give their patients guinea pig blood mixed with soda as a substitute for blood.

"I give him this guinea pig blood because every time I go to the hospital, they tell me there's no blood, so this helps sustain him for the days there's no blood at the Fort Portal Regional Blood Bank," says the mother of the sick child.

However, the acting medical superintendent of Bundibugyo General Hospital, Dr Amon Bwambale, says: "If you are taking that blood from the guinea pig and it is going through the digestive system, it is expected to be digested by the acid of the stomach. It is just like any other food. May be they (patients) can get nutrients from the blood as food but not necessarily that the blood has gone in the body to help someone [get] well."

Last month, the country was hit by an acute blood shortage. Consequently, there has been a surge in donations, especially at the regional blood bank.

An empty shelf is all we could



Effect. A woman grieves after losing a relative over lack of blood for transfusion at Nakasero Blood Bank recently.

see when we visited the blood bank nearly three weeks ago. However, the blood troughs are now fully stocked.

When we visited the blood bank on Tuesday, there were more than 2,000 units of blood in the bank's cold room and yet these units of blood had not been screened by 12:30pm. This meant the blood could not be used for transfusion.

Daily dispatch

According to Uganda Blood Transfusion Services (UBTS) officials, the bank is supposed to release a maximum of 1,000 units a day. However, they are only able to screen less than half of what is required for

a day. It takes about 45 minutes to screen one unit of blood, again screened in the hospital if it is administered to a patient.

"Every day we screen a units. We expect to have at least 10 units of blood issued to hospitals," says Ms Grace Otekat, the laboratory officer at Nakasero Blood Bank.

The blood bank estimates that Mulago hospital alone needs about 400 units of blood daily. Bombo Military Hospital and Kawempe hospital also need blood. This means that other hospitals like Kibuli and those up-country will not receive any unit of blood