

THE PREVENTABLE AND CURABLE DISEASE IS OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH...

By Hope Mafaranga

"I had lost hope of seeing again after I contracted trachoma. I dropped out of school because I could not read. My situation was so bad that I needed someone's support to walk," 14-year-old Saharu Nkedhe says.

Nkedhe, a resident of Kiringa in Iganga district, contracted trachoma at seven years. He is among an estimated 10 million Ugandans living with trachoma, which is endemic in 39 of 112 districts.

However, Nkedhe regained his sight after eye surgery following the Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust Trachoma Initiative campaign launched in 2014 to support the elimination of trachoma in Uganda. The Primary Five pupil is now back in school and can read and write.

The five-year initiative is aligned to the World Health Organisation global plan for the elimination of trachoma by 2020.

In Uganda, the Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust Trachoma Initiative has in supporting seven districts in Karamoja and 10 in Busoga region.

The programme is co-ordinated by the Carter Centre and implemented by Sight Savers and Christian Blind Mission (CBM) as partners.

Dr Johnson Ngorok, the country director of Sight Savers, said trachoma is a public health problem in 41 districts, mainly affecting women and children under 10 years. The most affected regions are Karamoja, Busoga, Lango, Acholi, Bunyoro and West Nile.

He explained that it mainly affects women and children under 10 because of the close association between mothers and young children.

"We need to sensitise women, because they are responsible for sanitation and good hygiene in a home," Ngorok said.

The disease

According to Ngorok, trachoma is a neglected tropical disease (NTD). It is the world's leading infectious cause of blindness. Repeated infections cause the eyelashes to turn inwards.

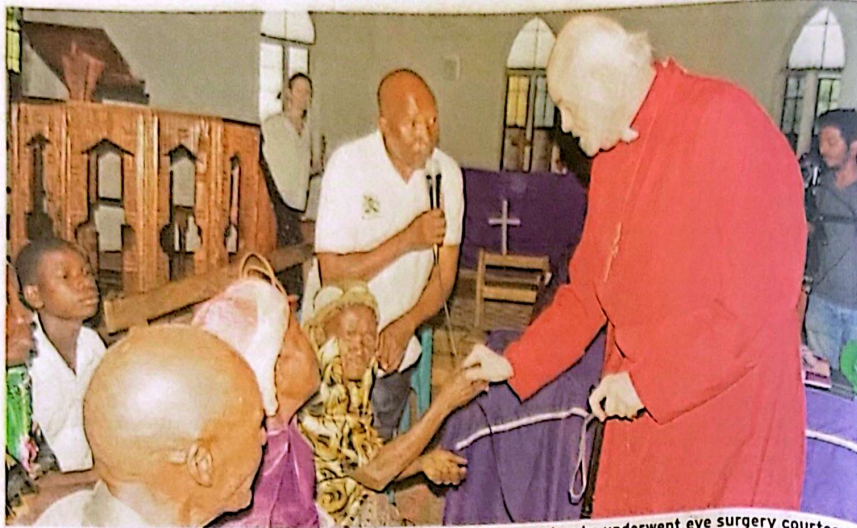
Trachoma is a contagious bacterial infection which affects the conjunctiva (membrane covering the eye) and also affects the cornea.

The preventable and curable disease, which is caused by "chlamydia trachomatis", is often associated with poverty and poor hygiene, according to Ngorok.

Explaining how the disease causes blindness, he said after repeated trachoma infections, the inside of a person's eyelid becomes scarred and turns inward, causing the eyelashes to scrape against a person's eye with each blink.

Ngorok said without immediate corrective surgery, a person with this condition will

Uganda on the right track to eliminating trachoma



Rt. Hon. Lord Richard Chartres interacting with residents of Kiringa county who underwent eye surgery courtesy of Sight Savers at Kiringa Primary School in Iganga district on Thursday. Photos by Lawrence Mulondo



Kiringa Primary School pupils entertain guests. Inset is Nkedhe

slowly and painfully become blind.

On track

Luckily, the disease has been eliminated in 39 out of 41 districts, according to the Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust Trachoma Initiative. But a recent survey on NTDs by the same organisation indicated the majority of Ugandans are not aware of the disease.

The organisation's chief executive officer, Dr Astrid Bonfield, however, said Uganda is on the right track to eliminating trachoma by 2020.

She said the disease is the leading cause of blindness globally, with a person losing sight every 15 minutes.

Bonfield said 229 million people globally are living with trachoma of whom 10.8 million are in Uganda.

"We are putting a stop to a disease that robs people of their sight. This is a success story globally and it gives me great joy to save women who are considered to be the traditional caretakers of the home," she said.

Treatment

Bonfield said the disease is controlled by a combination of interventions which include surgery to correct trachoma trichiasis, antibiotic treatment with Azithromycin for the acute infection and environmental hygiene which promotes the proper disposal of faecal matter to prevent re-infection and transmission to others. Access to clean water and use of soap and good sanitation are key.

She is optimistic that at the end of five years, surgery will be provided to 38,834 people with advanced stages of

blinding trachoma.

Richard John Carew Chartres, the former Bishop of London who also sits in the House of Lords as a crossbencher, said the trust was established by Queen Elizabeth II to celebrate her legacy of social change.

Bishop Chartres said the Queen, who has ruled longest of all British monarchs, has become a loved and respected figure across the globe. As such, she felt focusing on trachoma and other diseases in the Commonwealth countries, would be a befitting celebration of her 60 years of reign.

Bishop Chartres last week met eye surgeons, patients and community advocates in Kiringa village, Nawangaiza parish, Nawandala sub-county in Iganga district.

He said the queen was touched that over 10 million Ugandans were afflicted by

BETWEEN THE LINES:

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trachoma, a figure which the health ministry estimates has since reduced to around 300,000 people.

"Beyond the trust's five-year timeframe in which to deliver successful programmes, its aim is to leave a lasting impact and legacy in Commonwealth countries to honour Her Majesty the Queen," he said.

Working with communities

Bishop Chartres said the Trachoma Initiative has been working in 33 Ugandan districts and by the end of 2019, more than 38,000 patients would have undergone surgery to prevent them from going blind.

"Eliminating trachoma is now within reach and is as a result of the combined efforts of the health ministry, World Health Organisation, Sight Savers, The Carter Center, Water Mission Uganda and World Vision, communities and other partners," he said.

Bishop Chartres, who is one of the trustees, also met former trachoma patients who are now called "ambassadors of change" who engage with the community members on a

FOR HYGIENE

In figures

The number of people with trachoma in Uganda is 10 million

The number of people globally with trachoma is 229 million

38,000

The number of patients who would have undergone surgery to prevent them from going blind by 2019

daily basis to ensure change. They conduct micro training on trachoma prevention through water sanitation and hygiene practices and dispel myths and misconceptions about the cause of the disease. Michael Bazira, the Water Mission Uganda (WMU) country director, said since its inception in 2008 they have served over 85 rural communities with clean and safe water using the Living Water Treatment System.

"Our beneficiaries are mainly people who live in hard-to-reach areas. We have been able to integrate facial cleanliness and trachoma messaging into their existing WASH and socio-economic development messages," Bazira said.

Dr Francis Mugume, the trachoma programme manager in the health ministry, said with development partners the ministry is moving door-to-door to ensure those affected are treated.

He also said recruiting volunteer case finders has significantly helped reduce the time surgeons spend screening patients at outreach camps.

"In addition to performing surgeries in all endemic districts, they have undergone behaviour change interventions to encourage communities to improve hygiene and sanitation," Mugume said.

Patrick Wakula, the Bishop of Central Busoga Diocese, thanked the queen for her initiative.

The Iganga deputy chief administrative officer, Edward Musinye, said the trust has saved generations and helped those who were blind to see.