Medics warn against unsafe abortions

By Vivian Agaba

Serving at Mbale Hospital as a junior medic, Dr Isaac Odongo, while carrying out his routine ward rounds, bumped into a Senior Six girl who had been abandoned outside the theatre entrance by unknown people. She was bleeding profusely.

Odongo, out of courtesy, rushed the girl to the theatre where he administered four units of blood because she had lost a lot of blood.

"After, she told us she was trying to abort but things did not go as planned. We found out she aborted using a spoke of a bicycle tyre, which perforated her fallopian tubes," Odongo said.

Odongo recalls that when the girl's father, then the officer-in charge found out his daughter was admitted, he rushed to the hospital and upon being told what had happened, he arrested Odongo.

"I was taken into Police custody and made to sit on the floor for an abortion I had not carried out. I was arrested for saving the life of a young woman that did unsafe abortion," he said.

Odongo said since that incident, he has never looked back.

He has been involved in advocacy for safe abortions as well as sensitising community members and religious leaders on the dangers of unsafe abortions.

Odongo was sharing his experience during the second national conference on unsafe abortion in Uganda held at Hotel Africana in Kampala on Tuesday. The event, held under the theme *Taking stock of progress, opportunities, challenges and allocating responsibility* was organised by Centre for Health, Human Rights and Development.

Rebecca Wilaru, the assistant superintendent women affairs in the monitoring and evaluation department, Naguru, said some Police officers do not understand the laws on abortion.

> *"I was arrested for saving the life of a young woman that did unsafe abortion."* **Odongo**

She added that while carrying out arrests, they follow their religious views and ideologies on abortion, thus calling for more sensitisation of Police on the laws in relation to abortion.

Giving a keynote address dubbed, *Access to safe and legal abortions: A women's rights and gender issue*, resident judge Soroti High Court David Batema, said there is a lot of consistent and persistent misinterpretation of the laws on abortion.

He added that there is need to educate the public on issues of promoting safe abortion.

Unsafe abortions

Dr Charles Kiggundu, a senior gynaecologist at Mulago Hospital, said annually, 314,000 unsafe abortions are carried out in the country.

He explained that out of these, 1,500 women die annually due to unsafe abortion-related complications.

These abortions are mostly among girls of reproductive age between 15 and 24 years.

"Unsafe abortions come with challenges such as injury of reproductive organs like uterus, fallopian tubes and a woman may fail to have children in future. It can also lead to infections, over bleeding and at worst, death of a mother," he explained.

"We need to have guidelines in place in which women can have access to services for safe abortions," he added.

Adrian Jjuuko, working with Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum, said some health workers have lost their licences for carrying out abortions.

Even those recognised by the law; while others have been blackmailed and arrested by Police. "We have come across cases where health workers have lost their licences. While others have been arrested by the Police for handling cases of women who come to health facilities to seek treatment after abortions have gone wrong," Jjuuko explained.

"Others carry out abortions to save the mother's life in good faith, but have been arrested," he added.

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