

The donor who refused to watch his brother die

After eight years on dialysis, Stephen Mpagi gave his younger brother a kidney and a second chance at life. Their story highlights the growing need for kidney donation in Uganda, where thousands live with undiagnosed kidney disease and access to treatment remains limited.

BY BEATRICE NAKIBUUKA

After nearly eight years on dialysis, Stephen Mpagi knew his younger brother was running out of time. On December 20, 2023, inside the operating theatre of Mulago National Referral Hospital, the 28-year-old made a life-changing decision, not just for himself, but for his 23-year-old brother. As a clinical psychologist, Mpagi had spent years helping others cope with emotional pain. But nothing had prepared him for the slow, painful decline of someone so close to him.

"I could see my brother in pain," Mpagi recalls. "He could not urinate naturally. He was always weak, always in and out of hospital."

That day, Mpagi became his brother's kidney donor, offering him not just an organ but a second chance at life.

A silent illness

Unlike many childhood illnesses that show early warning signs, Mpagi's brother appeared healthy in his early years. But as he entered adolescence, things began to change.

He fell sick more often. Infections became frequent. Then came high blood pressure, a condition rarely seen in young people.

In 2015, after thorough medical assessments, doctors delivered a devastating diagnosis: his kidneys were abnormally small and could no longer filter waste effectively.

In Uganda, health experts estimate that up to 10 percent of adults may be living with chronic kidney disease, many unaware until it is too late.

The only immediate solution was dialysis, a procedure that removes waste and excess fluids from the blood. While life-sustaining, dialysis is demanding and far from a cure.

Eight years on dialysis

For nearly eight years, Mpagi's brother relied on dialysis three times a week, each session costing about Shs300,000.

"Our family got financially drained," Mpagi says. "Sometimes that money was not even enough because he would develop complications that needed extra care."

Beyond the financial strain, dialysis meant constant hospital visits, physi-



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT KIDNEY DONATION

● Only individuals in excellent physical and mental health are considered for donation. They undergo thorough screening for safety and compatibility.

● After donation, the remaining kidney adapts and increases its function to sustain the body.

● Most donors recover within weeks and live normal, healthy lives with follow-up care.

● Kidney donation is safe when carried out in specialised facilities.

● A transplant offers a significantly better quality of life than long-term dialysis and can save lives.

cal discomfort, and a life on hold.

According to the Uganda Kidney Institute, the cost of dialysis in Uganda remains beyond the reach of many patients, with thousands unable to sustain long-term treatment.

"Kidney failure is increasing in Uganda, yet access to affordable treatment remains limited," notes a spokesperson. "Many patients start dialysis but cannot continue because of the high cost."

The growing need for kidney donation

Kidney disease in Uganda is rising, driven by high blood pressure, diabetes, and infections. Most patients, Dr Dennis Kiguli of Victoria Hospital explains, seek care too late.

"Most patients come to us when the disease is already advanced. At that stage, the options are limited to dialysis or transplant."

In Uganda, kidney transplants primarily come from living donors, often family members, because the country lacks a fully established deceased organ donation system.

A transplant offers better long-term outcomes than dialysis. Patients regain independence, return to work or school, and live with fewer restrictions.

"Transplant is not just about survival. It is about restoring dignity and quality of life," says Dr Kiguli.

A brother's choice

For Mpagi's family, a transplant once seemed impossible. The procedure was

On December 20, 2023, inside the operating theatre of Mulago National Referral Hospital, Stephen Mpagi successfully donated a kidney to his brother. PHOTO/ COURTESY

costly and often required travel abroad. Then came a turning point: they were selected for a government-funded transplant programme, part of Uganda's efforts to build local capacity.

Without hesitation, Mpagi volunteered to be the donor. "I knew it was something I had to do," he says. "He is my brother."

After several medical tests, doctors confirmed Mpagi was compatible, with a low risk of organ rejection. On the day of surgery, the brothers were wheeled into the operating theatre.

"I felt fear, hope, and determination all at once," Mpagi recalls. "But I trusted the doctors and wanted my brother to live."

The transplant was successful. When he woke up, Mpagi's first question was about his brother.

"I asked the doctors if my kidney had worked," he says. "When they told me yes, he had, and he could urinate on his own, I cried tears of joy."

For the first time in years, his brother was free from dialysis.

Life after donation

Recovery for Mpagi was faster than many expected. Managing a surgical scar with painkillers and antibiotics, he resumed a normal, healthy life, challenging myths about organ donation.

"One kidney can sustain life," he explains. "After donating, the remaining kidney grows bigger and continues to support the body."

Medical experts confirm this. The remaining kidney undergoes compensatory hypertrophy, increasing its function to make up for the loss. Dr Kiguli explains that donors initially lose about 50 percent of kidney function, but the remaining kidney can adapt to reach 80-85 percent, allowing a normal life.

Breaking misconceptions

Despite success stories such as Mpagi's, many Ugandans hesitate to donate kidneys due to fear of permanent weakness or illness. Experts say these fears are largely unfounded.

"We carefully screen donors to ensure they are healthy enough," Dr Kiguli says. "With proper follow-up, most donors live long, healthy lives."

Cultural beliefs and limited public awareness also discourage donation, highlighting the need for ongoing education campaigns.

Challenges ahead

Uganda has made progress in kidney care, but challenges remain. The country has a limited number of dialysis centres and transplant specialists. Only a small fraction of patients in need can access transplants.

There is no fully established deceased organ donation system, which could increase available organs. The Ministry of Health Uganda plans to strengthen organ donation policies and expand services, but significant investment is still needed.

"Building a sustainable transplant programme requires infrastructure, trained personnel, and public trust," says Dr Kiguli.

A second chance

For Mpagi's brother, life is no longer defined by hospital visits and suffering. For Mpagi, the experience remains deeply meaningful.

"The best moment of my life was seeing my brother off dialysis," he says.

In a country where many are still waiting for a second chance, his story reminds us that sometimes, that chance begins with one person's decision to give.