

Inside the quiet battles preterm babies fight

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BY PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

In an ordinary morning in January, Prossie Mukasa walked into International Hospital Kampala (IHK) expecting a routine check-up. Instead, she walked into a storm she could never have prepared for.

"I had swelling everywhere. I thought I just needed to see my doctor and go back home. I was told I had eclampsia and that I would have to stay at the hospital until it dissolves. It did not," she says.

The next morning her doctor friend did a routine check and could swear Mukasa would likely burst if they waited any longer.

She was rushed to the theatre.

The mother of five six, reveals that every delivery before this had been simple. She jokes that she could walk into the hospital from work, deliver her baby, and walk back home. But this time was different. Nothing about it was normal.

When her baby was lifted for her to see, she was stunned.

"She was so tiny. Just 700 grammes, the size of my palm," she says.

Her daughter was whisked to ICU, where the real journey began.

Eighty-three days of faith

Mukasa lives in Buloba, and every day for almost three months, she and her husband made the long drive from Buloba to IHK and back.

"While I was struggling with the baby at the hospital, my husband was outside struggling to find the money. It was a very tough journey," she says.

Her baby never breastfed since during the emotional shock, her breast milk stopped coming. She was still in disbelief when she was told to use donor milk, since it was new to her ears.

"It took me some time emotionally, but eventually I accepted. And I am grateful. Donor milk kept my baby alive," she says.

For nine days her daughter stayed in ICU, and for another 74 days, she remained in NICU.

"I became like an employee at the hospital, walking through corridors, seeing nurses go on leave and return to still find me around," she recalls.

After 83 days, the baby who started at 700 grams left the hospital weighing 1.9 kilogrammes.

Five days later, complications



brought them back. More tests. More fear. More prayers.

But today, Mukasa's daughter is thriving.

"She is doing everything a normal baby should do. We are almost crawling," she says with a smile that finally reaches her eyes.

National burden we cannot ignore

Dr Immaculate Mirembe, a pediatrician and the lead of the Uganda Pediatric Association's Newborn Team, says the numbers keep worrying.

"In Uganda, we have about 226,000 babies born too soon every year. That is a very high burden," she says.

Born too soon, she explains, refers to babies delivered before 37 weeks of pregnancy. Most, about 85%, are born between seven and eight and a half months. The risks they face include breathing difficulties, feeding struggles, infections, and long-term complications.

But the numbers tell a harsher truth.

"Five percent of these babies, about 12,500, will not live to their fifth birthday," she says.

Mirembe stresses that premature births main cause is teenage pregnancies, hypertension in pregnancy, infections, malnutrition and poor maternal health, not forgetting domestic violence.

"These are areas where we must take action. We must fight adolescent pregnancies. Mothers must attend antenatal care faithfully. And if preterm labour happens, deliver in a hospital with proper facilities," Mirembe says.

A mom's painful journey

through NICU

Prudence Asobola's baby was born at just 33 weeks, weighing just one kilogramme. Asobola, a nurse at Ccare IHK hospital looked normal. Everything seemed fine, until it was not. One day, she started having labour pains before the due date. She called her gynecologist immediately, who told her to go to hospital. They tried to stop the labour. But her baby had other plans.

"The moment they stopped the medication, my water broke instantly," she says.

She was rushed to the labour suite. Her doctor drove from wherever he was, late in the night, to be there. Then the NICU journey began. "It was hard. Saying 'hard' is even an understatement. I knew too much. I understood every risk. Every complication. And I was watching my own baby go through them."

She urges government to help reduce taxes on health equipment.

"Ministry of Health, URA, please stop taxing essential items for preemies. Milk fortifiers, caffeine, pre-

palm. The length of her tiny feet matched her finger.

"Seeing your baby struggle to breathe is a pain I cannot describe," she says.

Like many mothers, stress dried up her breast milk.

"Signing for donor milk was emotional, it saved my baby's life," she says.

NICU became a classroom. The nurses taught her how to feed, hold, and care for a preemie. She had what she jokingly calls a 'retake' after she was discharged and sent home, only to be readmitted with her baby. Today, her daughter is strong, active, and thriving. She jokes that the baby might even be extra active because of all the caffeine they give preemies.

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Children attend a party to celebrate World Premature Day at C-Care, Namuwongo. PHOTOTO/PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

OVERVIEW

A premature birth means a baby is born too early. The birth takes place before the 37th week of pregnancy. A typical pregnancy lasts about 40 weeks. Premature babies often have serious health problems, especially when they're born very early. These problems often vary. But the earlier a baby is born, the higher the risk of health challenges.

A newborn can be:

- Late preterm, born between 34 and 36 completed weeks of pregnancy.
- Moderately preterm, born between 32 and 34 weeks of pregnancy.
- Very preterm, born between 28 and 32 weeks of pregnancy.
- Extremely preterm, born before 28 weeks of pregnancy.
- Most premature births happen in the late preterm stage.

mie formula, breast milk storage bags, these things are lifesaving but highly expensive. Please listen to us," she says.

Love as the first medicine

Dr Ronald Kyambadde, a NICU doctor at IHK hospital says working with preemies needs every bit of priority. One in 10 babies born, he says, is preterm.

Echoing the world premature day them a strong start for a bright future, he says that when a mother does not receive timely care and compassion during pregnancy, the baby cannot have a strong start.

He backs up the theme by highlighting that some of the world's greatest minds were preterm; the likes of Albert Einstein, Charles Darwin, Stevie Wonder.

"They had bright futures because they had strong beginnings," Kyambadde says.

CCare celebrated world premature day with mothers and little warriors on November 14, 2025 at IHK hospital, Kisugu.

