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BY TONNY ABET

Although several Ugandans lost loved ones in hospitals last year, advanced surgical and other medical procedures also saved many lives in different hospitals in the country. Access to some of these advanced medical interventions in major and lower health facilities has reduced the need to travel abroad or long distances for these services, thus lessening the financial burden on families.

In Mulago National Referral Hospital, which, by its mandate, is supposed to lead in providing advanced medical care, up to 6,489 advanced surgeries were performed in the last two years, according to records from the facility. The hospital is supposed to mainly intervene in conditions that cannot be handled in lower health facilities.

"Advanced technology-driven procedures were 82 laparoscopic surgeries, 19 arthroscopy surgeries, 390 laser surgeries and 11 endoscopies," information from the hospital indicates.

Laparoscopy, arthroscopy, and endoscopy are all minimally invasive procedures where a special camera is inserted into the body, either through a small incision or a normal body opening like the anus, to view the targeted body part, diagnose disease and guide surgical operations. The wounds created are tiny, keyhole size, and they heal faster than those of traditional open surgery.

Kidney transplants

Information from Mulago hospital indicates that a total of five kidney transplants have been successfully conducted, saving the lives of those with kidney failure and who were at high risk of dying. The facility performed the first kidney transplant in December 2023, on a 24-year-old, but the age categories considered for transplant have also been increasing for the free surgeries.

These procedures have, over time, been done along with medical experts from India and the United Kingdom as the team at Mulago, led by Prof Frank Asiimwe, refine their skills to take full charge of the transplants.

"I'm excited to say Mulago has now made it a habit to transplant. The first time something happens, one could say maybe it was an accident; maybe it was a fluke; that was December 2023," Prof Asiimwe said.

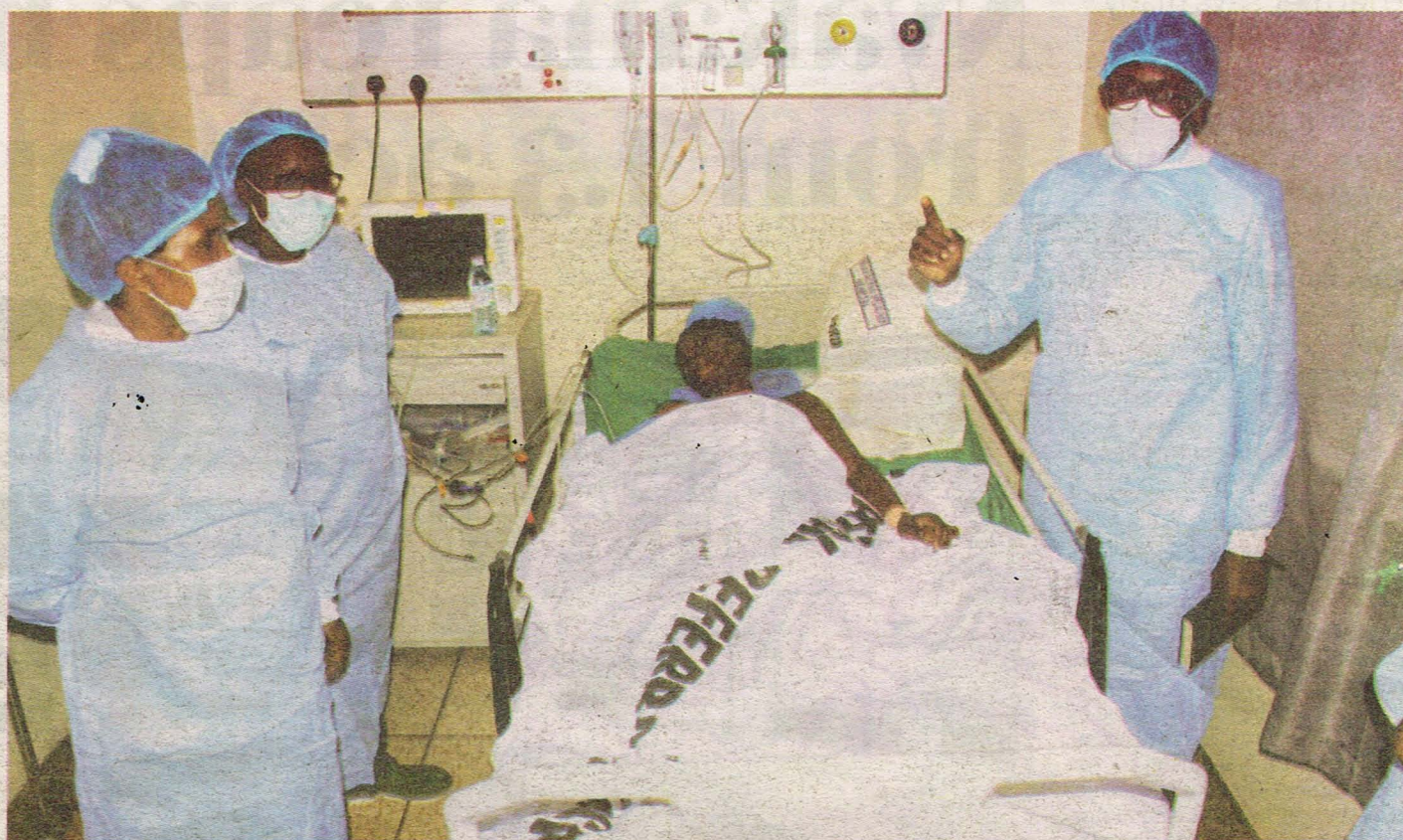
He added: "The second time (in 2024), okay, (someone may think it is) a bit of a coincidence. But when it happens for the third time (in July 2025), that becomes a habit."

Dr Peace Bagasha, a kidney specialist at the facility, said the beneficiaries are from the age range of 16-57.

On the selection of beneficiaries, Dr Bagasha explained that they follow stringent procedures to select the beneficiaries.

"So, to be eligible for transplants initially, you should be a dialysis patient. So far, we have over 400 patients on dialysis in the country, so all these

Doctors check on a kidney donor at Mulago National Referral Hospital on November 22, 2024. Experts performed 284 urology surgeries (for bladder, kidneys) in the last two years. PHOTO/FILE



Inside the 6,000 advanced surgeries that saved lives

are potentially eligible patients for transplant," she explained.

Dr Bagasha added: "Patients with terminal kidney disease also become eligible for transplant. Our 16-year-old had serious malaria, and this is one of the causes of kidney failure."

Besides the requirement for the patient to get a donor, who is a close relative, Prof Asiimwe also indicated that they assess the patient's ability to continue buying the medicines, which they should be taking after the transplants.

He said the medicines cost around Shs1.5 million per month. It is also estimated that the government bears the cost of around Shs40 million to perform each transplant.

The organs should be donated free of charge (no buying or selling of organs), and the donors should not be coerced, according to the provisions in the Uganda Human Organ Donation and Transplant Act.

Brain, neurosurgeries

According to details from the hospital, the largest number of surgeries were for skulls and bones, mainly because of the high number of motor accidents in the country and the high burden of joint and bone problems.

A total of 1,498 neurosurgeries, which "include skull reconstruction and base of the skull surgeries," and another 1,557 specialised orthopaedic surgeries that include spine, total hip and knee replacements were also performed.

According to management, performing some of these surgeries, which are largely on an emergency basis, affects the provision of elective surgeries for other patients, resulting in longer waiting times.

Dr Alexander Bangirana, a senior consultant orthopaedic surgeon at Mulago hospital, said they work with some of their partners from the US

BENEFICIARIES

Mr Musa Matovu from Proline football club, benefited from advanced arthroscopy surgery to repair his joint. Arthroscopy is where a surgeon inserts a narrow tube attached to a fibre-optic video camera through a small incision – about the size of a buttonhole to guide the expert as he/she operates on the patient. Very small incisions (around 1cm) that heal quickly are made on the knee or surface that needs repair.

"I was playing last season, and I tore my ligament, so I was supposed to go for surgery, but I didn't have money by then, so we heard about this medical camp, and the club helped me to register. I was operated on, and I am seeing improvement," he said at the hospital.

Another patient who benefited is Ms Sandra Apili, a nurse from Lira hospital whose knee was damaged after a road accident in Kigumba a year ago.

"I was in a taxi, and the car overturned. My knees turned upside down because of the crash. But I am now feeling better," she said.

and Kenya to reduce the cost of these services.

He explained that the partners often donate essential materials like implants put in the patients during the procedures, like knee replacement.

The senior consultant orthopaedic surgeon said: "On average, one knee implant costs about \$1,700, which is around Shs8 million. So if you total all the implants, that comes to over Shs200

million."

"The patients who have benefited are mainly the needy. Somebody has severe knee osteoarthritis and has nothing to do. It's just luck that we have our partners who have donated these because severe knee osteoarthritis is very disabling.

"You have your knee destroyed, the cartilage is destroyed, you are limited in your motion, you can't walk far, it's very painful, so when you get a new knee, you get a new lease of life," Dr Bangirana added.

Other major surgeries

Mulago hospital also performed 130 plastic and reconstructive surgeries, 406 paediatric surgeries, which include separation of siamese twins, laparoscopic oesophageal surgeries - operations on the throat.

Others include 278 endocrine surgeries (for hormone-producing glands like the thyroid, as well as pancreas), 257 oral maxillofacial surgeries that include jaw reconstruction, major tumour and trauma surgeries.

The experts also performed 927 gastrointestinal and surgeries for the stomach and intestines, 54 cardiothoracic surgeries (heart and lungs), 284 urology surgeries (for bladder, kidneys and urethra), and 1,038 eye surgeries and 55 ear, nose and throat surgeries.

What other specialised centres did

According to data from the Health Sector Performance Report for the 2024/2025 financial year, the Uganda Heart Institute performed 201 paediatric cardiac (heart) surgeries and 123 adult cardiac surgeries. While at the Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI), the surgeries were higher, at 1,484.

"Mulago Specialised Women and Neonatal Hospital reported extensive referrals and services, exceeding targets in surgeries and ultrasound scans, while

managing high-risk conditions," the report reads. There were 2,797 surgeries at this specialised hospital.

Advanced surgical techniques are also being performed in private hospitals and facilities located beyond Kampala. Institutions such as C-Care Uganda and St John XXIII Hospital Aber (Oyam District) emphasised their adoption of laparoscopic (minimally invasive) techniques for routine general surgeries, including hernia repairs.

International surgical missions, including the Uganda Spine Surgery Mission held in August 2025, provided specialised expertise and carried out intricate spinal operations for issues such as fractures and subluxations (partial dislocation of joints), employing advanced methods like L2 corpectomy and posterior spinal instrumentation.

L2 corpectomy is the spinal surgery to remove part or all of the second lumbar vertebra (L2) to decompress the spinal cord or nerves, while posterior spinal instrumentation involves using metal implants (like rods, screws, hooks) inserted from the back (posterior) to stabilise the spine.

In November, UCI, in collaboration with international partners, conducted specialised surgical care for patients with urological cancers in Gulu.

Working side by side with UCI surgeons and regional healthcare teams, these experts are performing intricate operations on patients with prostate, bladder, and kidney cancers and passing on advanced surgical methods and clinical insights.

"Many of our patients in this region face challenges accessing highly specialised surgical care. Hosting this camp here in Gulu brings advanced treatment closer to their communities and demonstrates the commitment of UCI to equitable cancer care across the country," Dr Fadhil Geriga, the director of UCI-Gulu, said.