

By **Godfrey Ojore**

Over 3,000 get free eye care

PHOTO BY GODFREY OJORE



A medical expert examines a patient's eyes during the three-day free eye medical camp in Bukedea

THE BURDEN

Uganda faces a growing burden of eye-related conditions, with an estimated 2.5 million people living with moderate to severe visual impairment and over 150,000 completely blind.

Cataracts account for over 57% of blindness cases, while

conditions like glaucoma and uncorrected refractive errors affect millions. The country is also faced with the challenge of eye care professionals, with only 40-60 ophthalmologists serving a population of over 45 million people.

When Romano Akure Omutoj lost his sight, he also lost the career he loved.

A veteran broadcaster who once served at Radio Uganda, now the Uganda Broadcasting Corporation, Omutoj was forced into early retirement as his vision deteriorated. Treatment was far beyond his reach, and like many others in rural Uganda, he quietly adjusted to a life of limitation. But over the weekend in Bukedea district, his story took a different turn.

Omutoj was among several beneficiaries who regained sight during a three-day free eye medical camp organised by the Ruparelia Foundation at Bukedea Teaching Hospital.

"If such camps had come earlier, I would have been helped. But I thank my daughter Anita Among (Speaker of Parliament and area woman MP) for bringing this service closer to us."

The outreach, which began on March 27, attracted patients from across the Teso sub-region and neighbouring Bugisu, many of whom had lived for years with untreated eye conditions due to cost and limited access to specialists. Like many others, Omutoj did not require surgery, but received treatment and corrective lenses that now allow him to read and see clearly again.

According to Sheena Ruparelia, the outreach co-ordinator, over 3,000 patients were attended to during the initial three days, with 265 surgeries successfully conducted, including 25 children. "We don't just screen and send patients away," Sheena said. "We

make sure they receive treatment. That is what makes the difference."

Due to the high demand, the camp was extended by an additional three days to cater for more than 200 patients who were still awaiting surgery by Sunday.

The initiative is part of a broader effort by the Ruparelia family to honour the memory of their late son, Rajiv Ruparelia, who died in a car crash last year at the Busabala Flyover along the Kampala Southern Bypass. "Rajiv always went beyond the

Lawrence Muganga, the vice-chancellor of Victoria University and a friend of the late Rajiv, commended the family for the initiative, describing Rajiv as a compassionate individual who cared deeply about humanity.

Celestine Apeet, another beneficiary, said the camp spared her a long and expensive journey for treatment.

"They have saved me from going to Tororo. I have received medication and reading glasses for free," she said.

Speaking at the launch of the outreach in Kampala, Speaker of Parliament Among thanked Ruparelia for his continued support to the Teso sub-region, describing him as "a son of Teso."

She also called on the health ministry to take note of the high number of eye-related cases recorded during such camps, warning that the issue requires urgent national attention.

"We celebrate the life of Rajiv by supporting initiatives that touch people directly," she said.

Ruparelia emphasised that giving back is deeply rooted in his values. "In our tradition, what the right hand gives, the left should not know," he said.

The camp is the fourth such outreach organised by the foundation, following similar initiatives in Kampala and Kamuli.

In addition to eye care services, the outreach also hosted a blood donation drive, collecting over 420 units of blood.



Sheena Ruparelia, with her father, Dr Sudhir Ruparelia

norm," Sheena said. "This is our way of continuing that spirit of giving."