

SUNDAY LIFE

Dr Tamale, the test tube baby doctor

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“My mother was a traditional midwife and I saw her treat infertility with traditional medicine. She also delivered people's babies. When I was at the university, I decided to specialise in what my mother did but in a hygienic environment...
Photographs of smiling babies adorn the walls of the waiting area in Doctor Edward Tamale Ssali's gynaecology and maternity clinic in Bukoto. On one side of the wall are hearty words of appreciation from the parents of three babies - a set of twins and a girl who had prior to fertility treatment been unable to have children.

Many babies have been born using In vitro fertilisation (IVF) since Louise Brown in 1976, but never before in Uganda until the clinic opened its doors to the public, hence the birth of the first test tube baby in September 2004.

IVF is a technique whereby egg cells are fertilised outside a mother's body in cases where conception is impossible through normal intercourse. Ssali's clinic has registered the birth of the first baby born from a frozen embryo and birth by a surrogate mother in the East and Central parts of Africa. Prior to his opening of the clinic, couples facing infertility in Uganda had for long seen their dream of becoming parents fade away like a puff of smoke.

The few, who could afford, travelled abroad for the treatment. Ssali has practiced IVF treatment for the last 15 years. He says he was inspired by his mother's work.

“My mother was a traditional midwife and I saw her treat infertility with traditional medicine. She also delivered people's babies. When I was at the university, I decided to specialise in what my mother did but in a hygienic environment and with better technology.”

For his primary education, he attended Kako, while he went to Lubiri and Makerere college schools for his secondary education before he joined Makerere University.

“I later joined Makerere medical school as a lecturer in 1975 and was forced into exile in 1977. And while there I attended Nottingham University and worked in the United Kingdom.”

He was based in Kuwait from 1986 until he set up his clinic in 2004, which was officially, opened in 2005 by President Yoweri Museveni. He is a practicing consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist.

Fertility treatment, though still a new phenomenon in Uganda, is catching on if the buzzing activity at the clinic is anything to go by. “I have to work late sometimes. Some of my clients also work at odd hours and can't come for treatment during the early hours of the day. I can't go home and leave them unattended,” he says.

Ssali comes from a family of 10 children of whom he is the only surviving brother. “All my three brothers were killed and my two sisters died of natural causes.” He has a wife and five children: three boys and two girls.

LTV programme host

A typical day for him begins at 5 a.m. in the morning, when he wakes up to read his Bible and pray. Ssali also hosts a television programme Faith and Science on Lighthouse Television (LTV) every Sunday.

Every three days, he runs the distance of a mile to exercise. “It's important that you keep fit to avoid diseases,” he says. He finds his work very interesting and fulfilling. “It is such a joy to deliver a normal baby to a couple that has tried for ages without lack. The smile on their faces keeps me going,” he adds.

He hopes to start keyhole surgery, which involves operating on someone without surgically cutting his or her body. He also hopes that his clinic will soon be a learning centre. “It is important to share the knowledge that one has received for the good of the country.”

What gets him excited? “Life. To me life is a miracle, when you see an embryo become a human being that is amazing.” The love and passion for his work has made him study harder. “I have five degrees and I also trained as a general surgeon.” He explains that when you want to excel at what you do, you have to study and be willing to learn more.

So would it be right to say that he is an academician? “Yes if that will get me ahead in my field.”

Outside enabling infertile couples have children, Ssali says that he plays the piano at his church and also loves gardening. “I also cook for my wife and love her cooking, she cooks my meals just the way I like them. We love chillies and even have a chilli garden. I love roasts as well.”

He advises men not to leave kitchen matters to their wives, “It is wrong and she also gets tired. Besides you shouldn't think that you married her to be stationed in the kitchen.”

His philosophy

His philosophy on life is to “fear God, love your neighbours and serve your country.”

Ssali reveals that he gave up a more paying job in order to be able to provide fertility treatment at home.

“I would be earning a lot overseas but I decided to station here. Money isn't everything. Even though it is important, it is just part of life. “There is more

to life than money. The Bible says that the life of a man doesn't consist in the things that he owns."