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Uganda: HIV Positive Athletes Still Face Stigma, Discrimination Over Status

By Halima Abdallah

Since his childhood days, Godfrey Lubangakene has not known a joy better than football. He played the sport right through primary to secondary school and was the star player at Butabika Soccer Academy for five years.

While his talent is indisputable, there's one thing that gets in the way of him playing for a big team: His HIV positive status. Lubangakene found out he was HIV positive in 2007 through Reach Out Mbuya Parish, a Catholic Church initiative working with poor people in slums. The initiative has helped him get medicine, paid for his education and supported the development of his talent.

"When a football opportunity arises, I am subjected to medical tests just like all other players but when they find out I am positive, they do not give me clear answers," he told The EastAfrican.

Not one to despair, Lubangakene chose to use football to fight the stigma of being HIV positive. And what better way to do this than by being a coach at only 21 years of age.

Lubangakene helped found the Don Juniors Club and took up the coaching position.

Lubangakene is not alone. In September, he joined HIV positive adolescents during a sports gala held in Kampala. The gala brings together adolescents from around the country to play a variety of games such as netball, football, volleyball and indoor games.

Johnny Mugerwa (not his real name), who is also HIV positive, attended the gala. Though he prefers to hide his identity over fear of discrimination, Mugerwa enjoys helping younger boxers train.

"I find that I am getting stronger and more competitive because of the counselling and support I get," he said.

Does physical exertion pose a risk to HIV negative sports people to warrant exclusion? Health officials say it doesn't.

"There is nothing wrong with HIV positive athletes participating in sports, so they should not be discouraged," said Alex Ario, commissioner of the Aids Control programme in the Ministry of Health.

There's only one caveat: "When HIV positive players get injured and start to bleed, they must be treated carefully because there is a possibility of transmission because of the open wound," said Dr Ario.

Health officials say exercise helps to boost the immune system of HIV positive people.

"Participating in sports events gives adolescents an opportunity to socialise, meet new friends and have fun together, which helps them to forget about their status," said Mwima Mubakali Junior, a peer educator at the Naguru Teenage Information and Health Centre in Kampala.

Although there is no documented evidence of a player getting infected with HIV or hepatitis B and C while taking part in sports, the World Health Organisation and FIFA issued guidelines for implementing precautionary measures.

No bias

"We do not allow discrimination of HIV positive sports men and women," said James Sekajugo, sports physician and member of the FIFA medical committee.

Despite this, many athletes like Lubangakene say their HIV positive status impacts their ability to compete professionally.

Currently, there is no vaccine against HIV, but research has led to the development of medication that can suppress the amount of HIV virus in the blood (viral load). When the viral load is low, HIV positive persons are less likely to fall sick.

The US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that there are about 36.7 million people living with HIV worldwide.

Recently, clinical trials -- run by doctors and scientists at the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial College London, University College London and King's College London -- showed a British man being cured of HIV.

Tests showed the virus had become undetectable in the 44-year-old's blood, after he was treated with a pioneering new therapy designed to eradicate the virus.

The patient was the first of 50 people to complete a trial of the ambitious treatment which launches a two-stage "kick and kill" attack on the virus.

The new therapy is unique in that it tracks down and destroy HIV in every part of the body --including in the dormant cells that evade current treatments.

Antiretroviral therapies target and suppress active infected cells but they leave millions of dormant infected T-cells lying in wait throughout the body. The existing treatments are unable to cure the disease.

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