Chain Reactions: Medicine Woman

Scovia Kasolo melds modern with traditional in Uganda

July 1, 1999 By Timothy Burton and Tim McCarthy

Scovia Kasolo, a Ugandan nurse-midwife, was pregnant with her fourth child in 1991 when she was hospitalized with the chills and fevers of malaria. She recovered and gave birth to a daughter, Sandra, but soon developed chest pains and was diagnosed with pneumonia. On its heels came another bout with malaria. “Being a health worker in the hospital, I was seeing so many people with AIDS. I had the information about infection and risks. And my partner was polygamous,” Kasolo says. “My instinct was telling me to get tested.” Her test news wasn’t good.

From watching three brothers and a sister with AIDS die very quickly while others who sought out support survived much longer, Kasolo had learned that she had to protect herself with information. She made her way to Traditional and Modern Health Practitioners Together Against AIDS (THETA).

We met Kasolo, now 38, at THETA’s headquarters, located on a dirt road in Kampala, Uganda’s capital. From its cramped, concrete-walled offices, THETA serves as a crucial information bridge, bringing the approaches of modern health practitioners to Uganda’s popular and respected traditional healers. THETA trains traditional healers as community counselors and HIV and STD educators, and in basic clinical diagnosis. It also researches the use of herbal medicine, and distributes this information at its training center.

“What made me feel so eager to come to THETA was that I would be able to help people living with the infection directly,” says Kasolo. “I thought that was the biggest thing I could do before AIDS takes me.” Joining THETA was like coming home for Kasolo, whose parents had sought out traditional healers when she was young. Healers combine herbal preparations culled from indigenous plants with spiritual knowledge, sometimes gained through visions, to treat complaints ranging from childhood measles to debilitating fevers. Kasolo, now on THETA’s staff of 25, follows the status of people who use herbal treatments and traditional healers to treat their HIV and tracks treatment efficacy.

With Western doctors unaffordable or far away, health care for most Ugandans comes dressed in the attire of a traditional healer. But when HIV first surfaced in Uganda, Kasolo says, traditional healers, much like Western-trained practitioners, said the illness was beyond their capabilities. Some people thought HIV was a form of witchcraft and would say so when they consulted the only person skilled in removing those evils -- the traditional healer. As a growing group of healers

began working with THETA and undergoing training, they were able to fuse Western counseling skills and HIV transmission information with their own communicative abilities as healers. The result? Traditional healers could remove the witchcraft -- but also advise their patients to consider testing. “As we continued to work with the healers, I realized that something was happening, something was working for people with HIV,” Kasolo says. Their health improved.

Kasolo herself takes no medication, save for antimalarial drugs such as chloroquine and remedies prepared by local herbalists. Like the vast majority of people with HIV in Uganda, where the average annual income is $250, she can only dream of access to antiretroviral therapy. She keeps busy, serving as the chair for the National Community of Women Living with AIDS and HIV in Uganda, and eats well, getting her fill of local fruits and vegetables and the Ugandan staple of steamed, mashed bananas known as matoke. Her daughter Sandra looks visibly healthy and happy, though the child has never been tested.

“I think I have realized something about acceptance,” Kasolo says. “I’ve seen many of my friends who have died because they don’t accept the situation. I have a basic way of living that has helped me a lot.”

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Chain-Reactions-Medicine-Woman-1538-7352