

## PROFILE

# Doctor whose work puts smiles on mothers' faces



Dr Emmanuel Rwamushaija (main) and some of the mothers he has worked with in promoting the use of misoprostol, a drug that addresses leading causes of maternal deaths. PHOTOS | FILE

Dr Emmanuel has dedicated his life to helping mothers enjoy safe delivery

By Sharifa Kalokola

In a country where maternal mortality is 454 per 100,000 live births, efforts to curb these deaths are most wanted. Luckily, there are people who have dedicated their lives to saving a woman's life, including during childbirth.

Meet Dr Emmanuel Rwamushaija, the technical director of Venture Strategies Innovations (VSI), an international nonprofit organisation committed to improving women's health in developing countries.

Registered in Tanzania as an NGO, VSI's a US-California based organisation. Its country office in Tanzania is found in Dar es Salaam.

It is from here that Dr Emmanuel contributes to efforts aimed at saving women's lives in the country.

"I love watching mothers smiling after delivery," he tells Sound Living.

The specialist obstetrician and gynaecologist has worked at several hospitals. He has also been part of various health programmes in both Tanzania and Mozambique, taking

care of women's reproductive health issues.

## Dedicated professional life

Dr Emmanuel has been with VSI since 2007, and has dedicated his professional life to supporting maternal health in Tanzania and Africa in general.

VSI promotes the improvement of maternal health using simple, low cost solutions.

Currently, the NGO is supporting the public and private sector in the prevention of the two major causes of maternal deaths namely, postpartum haemorrhage (heavy bleeding after birth) and complications of unsafe abortion and miscarriage with the generic medicine, misoprostol.

In Tanzania Mainland and Zanzibar, VSI works collaboratively with the ministries of Health and other partners to implement programmes that advance women's health, strengthen communities and ultimately save lives.

Half of the deliveries in Tanzania take place at home, although 96 per cent of pregnant women receive antenatal care (ANC)—medical supervision given to pregnant women and their babies starting from the time of conception up to the

delivery.

And in the absence of a skilled birth attendant, misoprostol tablets (which are easy to administer and do not need refrigeration) offer a mother a realistic option to prevent bleeding after delivery at home. Other effective drugs (injections) cannot be given in such a situation.

However, VSI does not advise women to deliver at home, but instead encourages them to go and deliver at health facilities. Misoprostol is said to prevent postpartum haemorrhage (excessive bleeding after birth), which contributes up to 28 per cent of maternal deaths in the country.

Recently, the government decided to start a countrywide programme to include misoprostol tablets in 'Clean Delivery Packs' given to mothers during antenatal clinic visits.

Melissa Higbie, a colleague of Dr Emmanuel's and the Country Representative of VSI, says that VSI plans to enable women all over Tanzania, especially in remote areas, to have access to this essential medicine.

## Passion

And if it is passion for such work, Dr Emmanuel has it. And it is not something that he began yesterday.

In the early 1980s, he led a Tanza-

nian medical team to Mozambique on a similar mission. Later on, he worked with the United Nation Populations Fund (UNFPA) and many other organisations that address the health of mothers.

His zeal to become a doctor started since childhood in Bukoba where by his father was working at a rural missionary hospital.

"I grew up in a hospital environment, so when I graduated in medicine I felt that I had to specialise in an area where there is a problem, and I realised that maternal health had larger issues," he says.

And now, many years later, Dr Emmanuel is rarely in his office as he leads a team of reproductive health experts going around the country advocating the use of misoprostol – a generic drug with many uses, but originally developed for the prevention of gastric ulcers.

Misoprostol is recognised globally by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as an essential medicine for addressing two of the leading causes of maternal death, postpartum haemorrhage and incomplete abortion.

"Misoprostol can be used to induce labour and postpartum haemorrhage and postabortion care," he explains.

## Family

With all his efforts, and this national burden on him and his colleagues, Dr Emmanuel feels that back in the days, even when he was still doing clinical work, he had less time with his family members, who include his two children.

However, his children are all grown up, and had decided to take up a different career path from that of their father.

## More about misoprostol

In Tanzania, misoprostol was registered by the Tanzania Food and Drugs Authority (TFDA) in 2007 for postpartum haemorrhage and in January 2011 for treatment of incomplete abortion and miscarriage. With support from VSI, 15 other countries, including neighbouring Mozambique, Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, and Zambia have also taken this important policy step in efforts to reduce maternal deaths due to postpartum haemorrhage and complications of abortion.

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