This mortuary visit saved many lives

RECENTLY, I visited informal settlements

that KENWA has centres in

to catch up with what’s happening in

our programs. In all our operational

Nairobi informal settlements, there are

no bedridden clients. These days all

our members are busy running income

generating activities. In fact, they are

asking for more loans to boost their

businesses.

It wasn’t always like this. Years ago,

I visited Korogocho where we have

a drop-in centre. This was during the

time when we were initiating antiretroviral

drugs support for our members.

When I concluded the tour, a certain

woman approached me.

“My baby is dead, but I can’t taker

her to the mortuary because I have

been told to provide fuel to ferry the

body.”

The other group members said they

refused to help her because she used

to lock the sick baby inside the house

and go for “road”, leaving poor baby

Asha without a caretaker and food. So

they concluded that it was good Asha

had died the way she (the mother) had

wanted. “Road” is the street name for

commercial sex work.

I drove the weeping mother to the

authorities to get a permit to take the

body to the mortuary. There were no

more issues as I would carry the body

in my car.

**Drama at the morgue**

The drama started at the mortuary.

It’s KENWA’s policy never to bribe for

services. The mortuary attendant, on

seeing it was a KENWA car, quickly

told me, *“Nyinyi KENWA si mnajibebeanga*

*mwili msinipe chai?* He was

accusing us of never bribing him, because

we always carry “our” dead.

“Come I’ll show you where to place

the body,” he continued.

The mother was still weeping inside

my car, next to her dead baby’s body.

The prudent thing to do was for me

to pick the body alone and follow

the mortuary attendant, leaving the

mother in the car.

I picked the small body - actually

there was nothing much to pick as it

was just a small skeleton wrapped in

human skin - and I followed the attendant

to the hall. I passed several bodies.

I think this person was punishing me or

KENWA for refusing with *chai.* I placed

the baby on the appointed trolley next

to another body, and then covered

Asha with the baby shawl she had

been wrapped in.

In a no-nonsense manner, the attendant

told me to remove the shawl,

saying the baby didn’t need it. I removed

it, leaving the thin, rather exaggerated

long and stretched body.

“Undress the body,” the attendant

ordered, which I obediently did. The attendant

was still unrelenting.

“Mama, so that’s why you’re covering

the body? You have not been feeding

the baby, so you come here to cover

the body with a shawl to avoid embarrassment.

You should be ashamed you

killed this baby with starvation.”

I didn’t explain that the baby was not

mine, there was no point in dishing the

mother more agony and misery.

I was ordered to tag the body, which

I did. As I exited the mortuary I vowed

one thing: something will have to be

done to stop these “avoidable deaths”.

**Cracking the care whip**

In the next community workers

meeting, we cracked the whip. We

indicated that for you to remain in

KENWA’s payroll, you must not lose

three patients in two months, if you

did, you would be disqualified from

work. This strategy worked.

Sick patients being taken care of at

home were now taken to hospital when

they required institutionalised care.

Since nobody wanted to be disqualified,

within a short time clients were

referred for antiretroviral therapy and

deaths reduced drastically. Nowadays

we go for months without a reported

death.

The mortuary attendant was somehow

right. I needed to be ashamed

that Asha had died out of neglect.

In a way, he made us work smarter,

and thereby “deny” him, not only *chai*,

but work.

WE NOW WORK SMARTER

This is the diary of Asunta Wagura, a mother-of-three who tested HIV-positive

25 years ago. She is the executive director of the Kenya Network of Women with

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**Activists and people living with HIV/AIDS during a past demonstration to demand**

**more money to support Kenyans living with the virius.**

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