

How LUTH bed space shortage aborted female student's dreams

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Twenty-year-old Deborah Doofan had many dreams. She planned to graduate from the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, with honours in 2026, become a first-class banker in one of Nigeria's prestigious banks at 25, get married two years after, and have a beautiful home with three lovely kids and a doting husband.

According to her elder brother, Prince, she vowed to help their family out of penury. But her dreams never materialised as her life was cut short by poor medical facilities.

Deborah was in an emergency and was rushed to the Lagos University Teaching Hospital, Idi-Araba, Surulere, Lagos, in the wee hours of Thursday, March 16, 2023, but the federal hospital could not provide her a bed space. She was left out in the cold, in the backseat of a car right in front of the hospital's emergency centre, where she died.

Prince, who had yet to recover from the shock of the incident, said all his efforts to save his sister had been a waste of time and resources.

While fighting back tears, he said the family was still mourning their mother, who passed away last year and struggling to support their hypertensive father, when Deborah died.

He told *Saturday PUNCH* that when his father was informed about her death on the telephone, the handset slipped off his hand and the line went dead.

"I had to send somebody to check on him as I was told he almost collapsed. This is just too much for our family to bear," he added.

On the circumstances surrounding Deborah's demise, Prince said, "We got to LUTH around 2am and called the emergency number. The security officials at the emergency ward started asking what the emergency was about."

"A doctor later came out and I showed him our referral letter. He brought out his thermometer, checked her pulse and temperature, and returned inside."

"After a few minutes, he returned and told us that their beds were occupied and there was no bed space to treat her. I pleaded with him to give her first aid or something to stabilise her pending the time that there would be bed space for proper treatment to commence."

"But he said their policy does not allow them to give treatment outside the hospital. I then begged him that he should allow me to take her inside the emergency ward and that I would sit on the floor and carry her on my lap so he can give her first aid treatment, but he still said no. She died at the front of the emergency ward while I was looking for a bench or table to place her on."

The beginning

Deborah was a 100-level student in the Banking and Finance Department, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

The 20-year-old was said to be studying in school when she collapsed and was rushed to the UNIPORT Teaching Hospital.

Prince said his sister was receiving treatment in the hospital when she was diagnosed with hyperthyroidism, a medical condition associated with overactivity of the thyroid gland, resulting in a rapid heartbeat and metabolism. That was in January 2022.

According to him, she was to undergo treatment when medical workers discovered that she had a swollen heart and thereafter referred her to LUTH to see specialists.

He said, "So, she left Port Harcourt and came to Lagos on December 24, 2022. We called LUTH to know if their specialists were on the ground but we were told that the machine that would be used for the hyperthyroidism treatment was not working."

LUTH was said to have referred her to the University College Hospital, Ibadan.

At UCH, Ibadan, a doctor reportedly

She was preparing for resumption

Deborah's course representative at UNIPORT, Favour Nkwocha, described her as a vibrant and loving student.

Nkwocha, who spoke to our correspondent on the phone, also said fellow students had yet to recover from the shock of her death.

He said, "We gained admission in 2020 into UNIPORT, but because of the coronavirus pandemic, we started lectures in 2021. After our first-semester examination in late August 2021, we went on a six-month holiday because the school calendar was not balanced. Before we could resume, ASUU started an eight-month strike. So, we stayed at home for 14 months."

"When we resumed last year November, Deborah was healthy. She was not a noisy person, but very outspoken. We even had a group presentation and she spoke very well."

"In December when the school went on Christmas break, she gave me money to buy textbooks for her and I did because our second semester examination meant to start this January. But she called me and said she would not be coming to class early and that I should help her with attendance and talk to some lecturers too. I asked her what the problem was, and she told me that she was sick and would be going for surgery in Lagos. I even asked her if she would make it back to school before the exam started and she said yes."

"But the exam started and she was not back; her brother then called me to know if the school would allow her to sit the exam later and I told him yes, but with good reasons, and if he would write to the appropriate bodies. He sent a letter and other documents, which I submitted."

Nkwocha disclosed that the school Christian fellowship organised a prayer session for Debby and wished her a quick recovery.

"During the exam, I spoke to her brother once and he told me that she was getting better; we even discussed her resumption."

"I haven't spoken again with the brother until Sunday when I opened my WhatsApp and saw the message 'Debby died on Thursday.' I couldn't respond to the chat. I didn't know what to say. I was shocked. I am still feeling the pain."

"This is a start of a new session and we ought to have resumed the 200 level with her but we lost her," he added.

Hyperthyroidism

According to medical experts, worldwide, thyroid disorders remain the second-most common endocrine disease, after diabetes.

The Chairman, Medical Art Centre and President, Academy of Medicine, Prof. Oladapo Ashiru, said thyroidism could be caused by Graves' disease.

He said, "Your thyroid is a small, butterfly-shaped gland in front of your neck. It makes hormones that control the way the body uses energy. These hormones affect nearly every organ in your body and control many of your body's most important functions."

"For example, they affect your breathing, heart rate, weight, digestion, and mood. If not treated, hyperthyroidism can cause serious problems with your heart, bones, muscles, menstrual cycle, and fertility. But some treatments can help."

According to Ashiru, hyperthyroidism will not kill once a patient seeks medical attention on time, adding that patients can live up to 90 years of age.

No bed space

The healthcare sector has always been plagued with the problem of poor infrastructure.

Nigerians regularly lose their lives after being denied adequate medical attention due to lack of bed space and sometimes non-availability of medical personnel.

A Lagos resident, Opeyemi Babalola, recently lost his loved one after the patient was reportedly turned back from both General Hospital, Ifako, and the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital, Ikeja, due to lack of bed space.

In pain, he stated, "May Nigeria not befall you and yours."

The Deputy Provost, Nigerian Institute of Journalism, Dr. Dele Omojuyigbe, narrated to the *Sunday Telegraph* how he navigated five Lagos hospitals in seven hours to save his dying wife from the no-bed-space syndrome.

"We had traversed five Lagos hospitals in seven anxious hours. Sadly, we got the same cold, lethal refrain, 'There is no space,' he stated. The woman later died."

The Chairman of the Medical Advisory Committee, LUTH, Prof. Wasiu Adeyemo, said the Federal Government was building a new facility in LUTH, which would give the hospital more space.

"But population is increasing; the problem is not limited to us," he added.

Speaking on Deborah's death, he said, "We won't say because it is an emergency, we will then chase admitted patients away. As a policy, we have a very effective way of communicating with our patients; it is quite unfortunate that this patient died."

"In a few months, all these will be solved. We have many of our wards under renovation, and there is another building being constructed in the hospital. By the time we are done, we would have more space and avert possible dangers of this sort."

He, however, noted that emergencies deserved attention irrespective of space or payment.

"When we see a patient like that, what we do is to investigate; patients sometimes come and there are no bed spaces and what we do is to refer them. But for a really serious, critical emergency, we inform them immediately that there is no space and give them options of where to go or take them to other wards. With or without money, it is the responsibility of the hospital to treat emergency patients in line with the policy of the Federal Government," he added.

Way forward

According to a biochemist at Green Springs Wellness and Maternity, Dr. Nnaemeka Iwunze, the challenge of insufficient bed space in hospitals can be resolved if the government equip primary health care centres to detect and treat cases that usually develop into emergencies.

He said, "If the primary health care centres are properly developed and equipped, these emergencies that get to the general hospitals will not get to that level."

"These primary health care centres should have qualified and well-trained doctors to handle issues so they won't get to emergency stages."

"Also, the government should develop the natural health sector. It's been over 20 years since the World Health Organisation declared that this sector should be developed to help the health centres, so we will have a robust health sector and prevent these emergencies because the natural health sector has the potential to treat these chronic emergencies."

"The government should also construct more emergency wards in the various state and federal hospitals."

Iwunze advised that doctors should be allowed to treat emergency patients outside wards and in temporary tents.

"Our policies should also be changed to accommodate the immediate action of a doctor to attend to an emergency irrespective of where the patient is, as far as the patient has been brought into the emergency centre."

"Setting up a temporary shelter can save a life in emergency situations within minutes when the wards are full. This is what we see outside the country; patients can be treated from anywhere," he added.



The late Deborah and her brother



LUTH emergency ward

recommended lots of treatment to bring her swollen heart down.

"The doctor said UCH had the machine for the treatment but specialists were not on ground and she needed to see a cardiologist to certify that her heart was in a good position for them to put her on a machine for the treatment," he added.

The Benue State indigene said the patient was referred back to LUTH to see specialists.

"To see a specialist is very expensive and because my funds were trapped in banks (due to naira scarcity), it became difficult for her to continue seeing specialists and continuing the treatment. So, she was just taking oral drugs, but the tablets were not effective, so her condition started getting worse."

"Before that, the swollen stomach and legs were going down, and she was getting better. She woke up one day and became restless; we tried to sort out funds to see a cardiologist in LUTH, but when we got there, we were told to go to UCH to get her admitted for doctors and specialists to treat her and monitor her condition," Prince said.

Prince said his sister was making plans to resume the treatment when she suffered a crisis and was rushed to the Epe General Hospital, from where she was referred to LUTH.

However, upon getting to LUTH at 2am, she could not get bed space.