

HOME / HEALTH / PAIN, ANGUISH, DEATHS AS JOHESU NATIONWIDE STRIKE CRIPPLES FEDERAL HOSPITALS



## Pain, anguish, deaths as JOHESU nationwide strike cripples federal hospitals

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- Over N100m lost, blood banks, medicaments lie idle as strike enters day five

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**It was five days of confusion, pain and anguish across the country as relations of the sick ones run around the federal hospitals to evacuate their loved ones who have been refused medical attention because of the**

**ongoing nationwide strike embarked upon by the Joint Health Sector Union (JOHESU) last Wednesday.**

Since the strike started, thousands of patients on admission have been ejected from the various hospitals' wards across the country, making their family members to pay through the nose as they scramble to evacuate them to private hospitals.

Members of the unions that make up JOHESU are pharmacists, medical laboratory scientists, radiographers, nurses, health technologists, health record workers, among others.

The adverse effect of the strike has continued to take big toll on the country with heavy losses of lives, vital and sensitive medical materials such as blood and plasma held in blood banks, as well as internally generated revenue that would have accrued from attending to patients and carrying out ancillary services.

Visits to major public hospitals in Lagos State and other parts of the country showed a grim picture of abandoned health facilities as the premises now look like ghost towns deserted by fleeing citizens as in wartime. Indeed, war has been declared on the public health system by both the government and the striking health workers.

At the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH), Idi-Araba, which is usually a beehive of activities in every department, all the halls were virtually empty, though the health facility is still limping forward as the consultants, registrars struggle to render skeletal services to the patients still on admission, whose conditions are so critical and cannot be easily relocated or simply unable to afford unsubsidized care in private hospitals. And ejecting them would amount to signing their death warrant, a prospect that LUTH resolutely resolved to avoid, no matter the cost in terms of manpower or stress on the senior medical practitioners who stepped into the breach to sustain the lives of their patients.

At the Accident and Emergency (A & E) areas, the few patients and their families who have no other hope but LUTH's A & E services were looking forlorn and troubled because of the absence of most pharmacists or laboratory attendants as they desperately sought basic services to save the lives of their loved ones.

At the entrance of the General Hospital Lagos, a male patient in his early 40s who came to the hospital because of his swollen foot that could hardly fit into his sandal cut the perfect picture of desperation.

He told *Sunday Sun* that he did not know what could have caused the swelling, adding that he had already seen the doctors but they couldn't tell him what was wrong with his foot because they were not lab scientists who would carry out the basic tests recommended by the doctor to aid in properly diagnosing the cause of the problem.

The story is not different at the Isolo General Hospital, another major health facility that normally bustles with patients and health practitioners officials. But since the strike commenced, the place has become quiet. However, some nurses were still seen sitting languidly on metal chairs as they waited for the minimal services being rendered at the hospital. A number of them who spoke to Sunday Sun decried the situation and appealed to the government to dialogue with the striking workers to save the common man from further agony.

"People are dying every day because of this strike," the women chorused in unison. Aside the avoidable deaths caused by the strike, the hospitals are losing revenue. Equally, huge sums invested in the procurement of medicaments and blood held in blood banks are wasting as the strike stretches, one of them said.

A health practitioner, who doesn't want to be mentioned, said that the country was losing huge sums daily because of the ongoing industrial action: "Strikes in the health sector do not bring anything good to anyone. Apart from the loss of lives, we also lose so much money because of strikes. Over N100million has been lost in the past few days."

Notwithstanding the suffering unleashed on the nation, officials of JOHESU have maintained that their strike is to compel the government to address the decay in the public hospitals in the country.

"We demand improved standards and welfare from our government but they have refused to pay attention to us. They have refused to see reasons and take necessary action," said Mr Rasaq Oni, a laboratory scientist, who is incensed by the government's seeming nonchalance.

"The government pays us only N5,000 as hazard allowance. That is very unacceptable. We face a lot of life threatening situations in the course of our jobs. As a lab scientist, many times I'm mandated to take blood samples from patients with highly infectious ailments. Sometimes we won't even have basic protective gear like hand gloves to perform the task. And yet we are expected to do our jobs under such risky condition, and get N5,000 as allowance. That is grossly unfair. Strike is the only language that the Nigerian government understands, so we have no option but to employ it anytime we're pushed to the wall."

Commenting on the effect of the strike on a vital aspect of health care delivery, Dr. Anthonia Ugwu, a medical doctor said: "Some months ago, we ran out of blood and then went out to the streets and churches on a massive campaign for donors. We got rewarded and gathered enough pints of blood for the bank. Now, with this JOHESU strike, I regret to tell you that many of those pints of blood continue to expire each day this strike lingers. And once blood expires, it can't be managed. You'll simply dig up the ground and bury it. Moreover, to bury the blood, you'll have to contract medical waste experts to do it. That is how we lose valuable pints of blood that should have been used to save the lives of patients.

"Although doctors are not part of the strike, but it is affecting us so much too. Because we can't do the work alone, we need the assistance of nurses, laboratory scientists and lab technicians, pharmacists and hematologists."

In the face of the severe shortage of health care staff, hospitals have had to fallback on medical volunteers who have stepped forward to take up the slack in the system to the extent that they can.

In a statement, signed by the Head of Corporate Services Division of LUTH, Mr. Kelechi Otuneme, the tertiary hospital disclosed that it had "made arrangements to work with the available manpower, along with qualified medical volunteers.

"There are many patients still in the ward and we are managing them with the limited staff we have. We are also managing emergency service to those requiring such."

#### **Calabar: JOHESU strike unfortunate, says UCTH CMD**

JOHESU strike is taking a toll on University of Calabar Teaching Hospital, UCTH, as key offices and departments have been shut down.

When Sunday Sun visited the hospital, only a few cars said to be owned by doctors were seen at the car park, which used to brim with the vehicles of members of staff of the hospital prior to the strike. Gone was the hustle and bustle witnessed on a normal day at the hospital. At the administrative section, there were not more than five members of staff as most of the health workers observed the strike and stayed away.

All the vital service delivery points, main theatre, dental clinic and pharmacy were locked up with very few senior medical students undergoing clinical training were seen attending to some patients.

However, the Department of Family Medicine, Ophthalmology as well as Pre-Natal units of the hospital were offering skeletal services with a few doctors attending to the few patients who came to the hospital.

Following the withdrawal of patients on admission because of the strike, it was gathered that the revenue generation had dropped significantly.

Speaking with *Sunday Sun*, the Chairman of Chief Medical Directors and Medical Directors of Federal Tertiary and Secondary Hospitals, Prof Thomas Agan, described the ongoing strike by the JOHESU as unfortunate and avoidable.

Agan, who is also the Chief Medical Director of the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital, said it was quite sad that the strike took place when everyone in the health sector should be working in concert to salvage the sector, stressing that the hospitals have not only been paralyzed but lives have been lost.

In response, he said that the management has taken steps to mitigate the adverse effects on the health of the people.

His words: "If you do not have enough manpower on ground to manage critical cases there is need to look for a way to handle them. The accident and emergency unit is open, the children emergency unit is open just as outpatient clinics are running because the doctors are still coming.

"It is very unfortunate that at a time like this when we need all hands to be on deck to ensure that the health of the common Nigerian is brought into optimal state, strikes are affecting a lot of Nigerians both old and young. As I've always said it's unfortunate, it's a strike that is arising out of demand for improved welfare of the health worker. It is true that JOHESU had placed demands on the Federal Government and I am aware that they had a MoU which was to be executed either fully or partly and as I have been made to understand, none of their conditions was adhered to by the government and they went out because of anger that the government seems not to be listening to them.

"It's unfortunate that many people will lose their lives both old and young. Very unfortunate and I sincerely regret and feel bad that the health sector is being paralyzed because of welfare matters. But so far, we have not recorded any death."

Also speaking, the leader of the resident doctors, Dr. Nabie Francis, said about 75 per cent of patients in the orthopaedic ward relocated to private clinics, noting that only patients in very critical conditions and who could not afford private care were still on admission.

"Their strike has grounded activities in the unit. The ward is about 75 per cent empty compared to what is used to be because there has never been a time where the ward has been less than 80 per cent filled.

"The orthopaedic ward is always about 98 per cent filled all the time; the reason is because most of the patients stay in the ward longer because their cases are not cases that will be treated in two to three days. So the patients in the orthopaedic and burns departments stay in the hospital longer."

#### **UNTH Enugu records one death**

When *Sunday Sun* visited the University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital, Ituku-Ozalla, Enugu, the hospital was desolate as most patients had been relocated to private facilities. Those unable to afford private care were forced to remain at the hospital, while in some cases their relations are becoming emergency staff. One example is Oliver Ezeorah who has been caring for his brother in Ward 10.

Hear him: "I dress his wounds because there is no nurse to attend to him and doctors will only come, write drugs and go. The worst is that you cannot get the drugs in the hospital because of the strike also. You have to go to Enugu town to buy drugs. I am planning to relocate my brother from here.

"One woman died last night because they put blood transfusion and there was nobody monitoring it. The red blood finished without mixing with the white blood cell and after that, the woman went into crisis and before doctors could remedy the situation, she died. The daughter is still regretting why she allowed them to start transfusion when nobody was there to monitor the progress. That is the situation now."

Then he asked rhetorically, "Yes, doctors are there, but to what extent can they combine both their job description and that of the other health workers?" as he urged the government to grant the demand of JOHESU.

Dr. Laura Odumegwuojukwu, a senior registrar, however, assured that consultants, senior and junior registrars were on ground to take care of patients, adding that the hospital is open for a 24-hour service.

At the Federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital, Enugu, the impact of the strike was so high. It could easily be felt from the gate as only security men were around with few patients.

Miss Joy Ezeorah told *Sunday Sun* that her sister was discharged on Thursday, but she could go home because there was nobody to check her record to know the balance to pay to allow her leave the gate. "So, we are waiting and the hospital is no longer giving her food. The nurses were not there and doctors only come in the morning to check patients and go," she said.

When the chairman of JOHESU, Federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital, Comrade Jude Ugwoke, was contacted he told *Sunday Sun* that the strike is an indefinite strike because the Federal Government reneged to implement the agreement it signed with JOHESU.

"We gave information to all the patients three weeks ago and renewed the notice that we would embark on strike if the Federal Government renege on the agreement we made. There was an agreement, we suspended this strike on September 17, 2017 and we had an agreement with the Federal Government over the lingering issues, which they agreed that they are going to implement. So, after exhausting six months, we started sensitizing our members over the strike and informed all the federal health institutions and research centers."

At the National Orthopaedic Hospital, Enugu, the story is the same. Only medical doctors and security personnel's were seen around.

#### **UIITH Ilorin and FMC Makurdi still offering services**

With the withdrawal of services by pharmacists, nurses, laboratory scientists and administrative staff, doctors at the University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital have been striving to keep the Accident and Emergency Unit open and render services to patients in critical conditions.

Similarly at the Federal Medical Centre, Makurdi, the Benue State capital, there was impressive compliance to the JOHESU directive by its members, resulting in paralysis of services.

The Chief Information Officer of the hospital, Dr (Mrs) Uyeh told *Sunday Sun* that all members of JOHESU complied with the stay-at-home order.

"All doctors were on duty attending to patients but all other health workers did not come to work because this is a national strike and all our members have to observe it."

The situation was not different at the Benue State University Teaching Hospital (BSUTH) as most health workers stayed away in compliance with the directive by JOHESU national leadership.

Expectedly, the loss of the public hospitals has become the gain of private hospitals, which patients have resorted to for healthcare services as they are witnessing a sudden upsurge in demand for treatment by patients who were forced to relocate to their facilities from either the FMC or BSUTH.

Healthcare services at the Federal Medical Centre, Owo, Ondo State, were also grounded by the ongoing strike. As seen in several other health facilities of the Federal Government, only medical doctors were available to render skeletal services to patients with critical issues at the hospital.

Outpatients did not receive attention. It was gathered that the management of the hospital took proactive measures to frustrate the attempt by some members of FMC-Owo branch of JOHESU to lock up some of the wards. Relatives of several patients relocated them to private hospitals.