

Extent of Media Coverage of Sickle Cell Disease in Tanzania. A Case of Mwananchi and Nipashe Newspapers

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents part of the findings of the research on the *Coverage of Sickle Cell Diseases in Tanzania taking cases from Mwananchi and Nipashe Newspapers*. This paper measures the Extent of Media Coverage of Sickle Cell Disease in Tanzania. It uses agenda-setting theory and quantitative content-analysis model to index all fitting items in the two most popular Swahili language dailies, Mwananchi and Nipashe, between the period of 1 st April and 30 st June 2025 a three-month period that includes World Sickle Cell Awareness Day (19 st June). The findings indicate an exceptionally limited coverage: out of 7,413 articles published by the two newspapers, only 45 (0.61%) were related to SCD. It is worth noting here that no coverage was done during the months of April and May and all 45 items were only reported in June a trend that highlights the event-oriented reporting in line with the global awareness day. Mwananchi has dedicated 27 items (0.74% of its corpus) to it compared to Nipashe with 18 items (0.48% of its corpus), thus proving a steady marginalisation in the two sources. This paper concludes that Tanzanian print media are currently not making full use of their opportunity to strengthen national SCD countermeasures. To this end, the paper recommends the need to plan editorial coverage proactively, to integrate SCD into the health beat of regular reporters, and to enhance the partnerships between media and health sectors to bring about more regular and substantive reporting on SCD.

Key Words: Sickle Cell Diseases; Sickle Cell Awareness Day; genetic hematology, World Health Organization.

1. Introduction

Sickle Cell Disease (SCD) is a genetic haematological condition caused by a mutation in the haemoglobin gene, leading to the appearance of abnormally shaped erythrocytes impairing the process of capillary perfusion and releasing bursts of severe nociception, organ dysfunction and increased infection vulnerability (World Health Organization, 2021). The estimated number of neonates (SCD) born each year is more than 300,000 globally with sub-Saharan Africa bearing a disproportionate burden of the disease between 5 and 16 percent of under-five mortality (Piel et al., 2013; Grosse et al., 2021). In this geographic area, it is approximated that between 50 and 90 percent of the children with SCD can die before the age of five in the absence of prompt interventions mainly because of a lack of access to newborn screening, hydroxyurea treatment, and necessary preventive care (Makani et al., 2020; GBD 2021 Sickle Cell Disease Collaborators, 2023).

Tanzania has one of the highest burdens as it is ranked fourth on the list of countries with a high number of sickle cell disease (SCD) births with an estimated number of 11,000-13,000 of impacted neonates each year (Nkya et al., 2019; Ambrose et al., 2020). The regional disparities are significant: the north-western parts around Lake Victoria display birth prevalence rates of up to 1.42-2 percent of sickle cell anaemia (HbSS), which are significantly higher than the country norms (Eastburg et al., 2018; Egesie et al., 2020). Without an early diagnosis and management, approximately half of all affected children die before their fifth birthday, worsening socioeconomic burden by causing disastrous health-care spending and productivity loss (Noah et al., 2024). Whereas the condition is integrated into the National Strategic Plan on Non-Communicable Diseases of Tanzania (2021-2026) and pilot newborn screening programmes are launched in select regions, there is a lack of awareness among the population, thus fostering the stigma and postponing the appearance of care-seeking behavior (Bukini et al., 2024).

The mass media is a strategic tool of health communications that influences the knowledge, attitude, and behaviour of the masses, and its role is critical in circumstances where the mass media has not given enough attention like in the case of sickle cell disease (Wakefield et al., 2010). Properly-formulated campaigns can help increase the awareness of genetic risks, pre-marital screening, eliminate the existing myths, and speak in favor of supportive policy actions, which has been successful in fighting HIV/AIDS and malaria (Atkin and Wallack, 1990;

Oronje et al., 2011). Print media, which continue to be dominant and widely used in low-resource contexts, are important channels of agenda-setting in stimulating perceived salience of issues and mobilizing community action (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Mburu and Odame, 2019). However, the chronic non-communicable diseases are often covered sporadically and event-related against infectious outbreaks, thus limiting the ability to maintain the attention of the population (Abdulraheem & Adepoju, 2021).

This question examines how much Tanzanian Swahili-language two leading dailies (Mwananchi and Nipashe) covered Sickle Cell Disease in three months. The research question is as follows: How much Mwananchi and Nipashe devote textual space to SCD?

2. Literature Review

SCD is an unparalleled worldwide health concern, but purposeful academic studies of the media coverage of this illness continue to reveal systematic gaps in the quantities of its coverage and the quality of its homogeneity. This analysis aims to outline the degree of media coverage of SCD by relying on information on the global, African and, specifically, the Tanzanian scenes to shed light on the common trends of low-volume, event-based coverage. It also highlights the sidelining of non-communicable disorders (NCDs) like SCD over communicable disorders, and at the same time, identifies a serious gap in empirical analyses of SCD coverage in Tanzanian print media.

2.1 Global Patterns of SCD Media Coverage

As indicated by World Health Organization in 2024, the prevalence of sickle cell disease (SCD) is estimated to be 7.74 millions with over 515,000 cases being diagnosed annually and is predominantly affecting low- and middle-income countries. Although this is a significant burden, media reporting is in most cases, both quantitatively and qualitatively scarce, and usually restricted to specific instances, including awareness campaigns or scientific advances. As an example, a systematic literature review by Grosse et al. (2021) was the study examining the epidemiology of SCD, where the authors noted that, although there is much data on the prevalence of SCD all over the world, there is limited information on media representations. There are spikes on coverage during World Sickle Cell Day (June 19) but coverage rarely extends beyond these points. This intermittent trend can be observed in the internet health information-seeking behaviour (OHISB) featuring relatively high search volumes of SCD

during the times of the awareness after which the volumes decrease significantly (Adedoyin et al., 2023).

This scarcity can also be demonstrated through quantitative analyses of media production. According to a bibliometric study by Sedhai et al. (2021) of worldwide SCD research activity, scientific publications have risen since around 1,000 per year in 1990s to more than 2,500 two decades later, but the number of publications cited in the media has been minimal, being mentioned in less than 5 percent of the news articles in major databases, including Google News. The media reporting on SCD is also rather sparse in high-income countries and, in particular, in the United States: a content analysis conducted by Olaoye and Agbede (2020) of major sources (e.g., the New York Times, CNN) has shown that the SCD stories constituted less than 1 percent of all health-related content in 2015-19 and were often related to celebrity announcements or new policy decisions, as opposed to regular reporting.

The social media platforms can be considered as supplementary in nature, and the discussion of SCD is mostly events-based. Recent data (Lee et al., 2024) of Twitter (since renamed X) in 2018 to 2023 found that global Twitter mentions of SCD were highest in awareness months, which comprised 6070% of the annual volume, and the baseline activity level was relatively modest, on average 10-15000 posts of SCD in 2018 alone. The given observation highlights the larger phenomenon: even though the incidence of SCD is expected to rise by 30% by 2050 (that being due to population growth in predisposed areas) (Piel et al., 2017), the amount of media coverage does not correspond to the magnitude of the epidemic problem, limiting the potential to raise awareness and engage in advocacy.

2.2 African Patterns of SCD Media Coverage

In Africa, where SCD is responsible for 80% of the global cases and putting a great deal of the newborn mortality under-five, media coverage is very restricted and thus very low with heavy dependence on event-driven triggers (Makani et al., 2015). Sub-Saharan Africa has roughly 240,000 SCD births every year, but the media pays extremely little attention to this issue in a very disproportionate manner. A study by Adedoyin et al. (2023) which analyzed OHISB across 10 African countries (e.g. Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania), concluded that SCD-related Google searches had an average RSV score of 20–30 throughout the year, but during World Sickle Cell

Day, that number skyrocketed to 80-100. This shows that coverage is mainly a reaction to international observances and not driven by the local situation.

Quantifying this underrepresentation are the empirical studies. Ogunjimi (2019), in analysis of print media coverage for 2016–2018 through content analysis of four major newspapers (Guardian, Vanguard, Daily Trust, Punch) from 2016–2018, found only 203 SCD-related stories, less than 1% of the total health coverage, in Nigeria, which is Africa's most populated nation with more than 150,000 SCD births per year. Similarly, in South Africa, Akintola et al. (2015) analyzed 2,077 health articles in print media from 1997 to 2012 and found that non-communicable diseases, including SCD, comprised only 21.4% of the content, most of the SCD references being around awareness days or health ministry announcements.

The event-driven characteristic is also evidenced in the regional campaigns. The African Union's 2022 sickle cell prevention drive launch was momentarily covered a lot by the media but the subsequent reporting was almost nonexistent, which was pointed out in the WHO (2022) reports. In East and West Africa, studies by Ampofo and Boateng (2020) in Ghana and Mutua (2020) in Kenya indicated that SCD was only mentioned in less than 10% of health stories, mostly during donor-funded projects or on global health days. These trends highlight the editorial resources applied to immediate crises, which is why SCD's visibility is so low, only around 50 stories a year at most per outlet—despite being endemic (Mburu and Odame, 2019),

2.3 Marginalisation of NCDs/Chronic Illnesses vs. Communicable Diseases

The enormous difference in the number of times NCDs, such as SCD, and communicable diseases were reported in the media, in terms of their coverage, has worsened SCD's already poor position in Africa. On one hand, communicable diseases like HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis occupy the major part of health news and account for 55-70% of the media content in Africa, while on the other, NCDs get little or no coverage, sometimes even below 20% (Akintola et al., 2015; Ezeala-Adikaibe et al., 2022). The situation is due to the disease burden being "double" in Africa, where the prevalence of NCDs is increasing rapidly (46% projected death increase by 2030) but still, the media remain biased toward the epidemics (Allen et al., 2022) that were historically given priority.

The gap between diseases is highlighted by quantitative evidence. In a report of media monitoring in Africa conducted by Internews (2018), 65% of health stories in a sample of 15 countries featured communicable diseases, and SCD among other NCDs received only 15% of the coverage, with the case of SCD in particular getting an average of 2-5% of the total coverage of NCDs. In Nigeria, Ezeah et al. (2019) found that newspapers allocated over 40% of health page coverage to HIV and malaria, while less than 5% was given to NCDs with low SCD imputable to the author's perception that these were not newsworthy compared to the cases driven by outbreaks. A similar situation was observed in the case of South Africa where, according to Chilwane (2018), infectious disease outbreaks produced 10-15 times more articles than chronic NCDs, thus pushing SCD to the background and giving it only episodic mentions.

This marginalization is connected to public health issues: the low amount of media coverage for non-communicable diseases (NCDs) goes hand in hand with the lack of awareness and screening, which is evident in exposure studies where mass media campaigns for communicable diseases produced higher engagement rates (Oronje et al., 2011). In Africa, the scenario is such that NCDs account for 37% of deaths now—overtaking communicable in some areas—while at the same time, NCDs are given only one-third of the media coverage, which leads to underfunding and stigma for diseases like SCD (World Health Organization, 2023).

2.4 Tanzanian Media Landscape and Health Reporting Trends

Tanzania's media landscape, which was opened up in the 1990s, has more than 100 print outlets, with Mwananchi and Nipashe being the most prominent dailies among the Swahili-speaking population (Media Council of Tanzania, 2024). Nevertheless, the reporting of issues related to health indicates that there is very little coverage given to chronic conditions like SCD; the health sector is mainly covered through the lens of communicable diseases and events. Mboera and Rumisha (2004) analyzed four daily newspapers and reported a total of 99 health stories within a year, of which cholera alone accounted for 85%, while the share of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) was almost negligible. In a more recent study, Mfaume (2021) analyzed the contents of Mwananchi and HabariLeo newspapers and found that the topics of maternal health and climate-related issues took the lion's share; however, NCDs like SCD represented less than 5% of the health content, most of which was related to specific awareness days.

In Tanzania, the coverage of SCD-related topics is very limited in terms of quantity. Bukini et al. (2020) pointed out that although there are about 11,000–13,000 SCD births every year, the media mentions are very few, with the print including less than 20 stories annually, mostly around World Sickle Cell Day. The Media Council of Tanzania report (2022–2023) showed that health stories made up 10–15% of total content, but NCDs got less than 2%, which is a reflection of the commercial pressures and resource limitations that the media have to deal with, leading them to focus on topics that have a large audience (Katunzi and Ssenabulya, 2022).

3. Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical framework of this research is the Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972), which states that the media, through their coverage's extent and importance, are able to guide the public's view of which issues matter most. In a complementary manner, it very slightly integrates aspects of Framing Theory, especially "framing by omission" (Entman, 1993), to signal how non-coverage can reduce the public's view of an issue as being important.

The Agenda-Setting Theory, which was first introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972) in their groundbreaking research of the 1968 U.S. presidential election, claims that the mass media do not tell people what to think but rather what to think about. The main idea of the theory is that the media's attention to an issue is the same as the public's perception of its importance. In health communication, this means that the media plays a part in bringing public health concerns to the societal agenda. For example, the media's frequent coverage of infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS has historically increased public awareness and policy responses, while little attention to chronic conditions such as SCD may push them to the edge of public discourse (Wakefield et al., 2010).

Applications in health promotion illustrate this point even more. A study adapting agenda-setting for health interventions found that media frequency directly influences community prioritization of preventive behaviors, such as screening for NCDs (Raupp, 2015). In African contexts, where media resources are limited, low-frequency coverage of SCD signals its lower salience compared to communicable diseases, potentially hindering advocacy and resource allocation (Mburu and Odame, 2019). Recent evolutions of the theory, including digital media

influences, reinforce that quantity remains a key predictor of agenda transfer, even amidst evolving communication landscapes (McCombs and Valenzuela, 2020).

4. Methodology

The researchers carried out a quantitative content analysis to methodically evaluate the media's attention given to Sickle Cell Disease (SCD) through the means of two of the most influential Tanzanian newspapers. Content analysis is "a replicable method for drawing inferences from texts through the quantification of manifest content in a valid manner" (Neuendorf, 2017). This technique was selected because of its applicability in determining the volume and frequency of the coverage, thus allowing for objective comparisons without going into interpretative qualitative dimensions (Riffe et al., 2019). The study, therefore, focused solely on quantifiable indicators such as item counts and percentages that are in line with the objective of the study to assess the level of SCD editorial attention.

The dataset included the entire published content from Mwananchi and Nipashe newspapers for the period of April 1st to June 30th, 2025. These two dailies that circulate in Swahili had daily readership of around 40,000–45,000 for Mwananchi, and 28,000 for Nipashe (Media Ownership Monitor Tanzania, 2018)—and their choice was not random because of their influence on the public opinion in Tanzania, the area where Swahili is the universal language. The three-month window was selected to provide a precise glimpse, capturing both ordinary and daily coverage that was mixed up with the spikes of events like World Sickle Cell Awareness Day on the 19th of June. This period included 91 actual days of publication for each of the newspapers (the calculations included daily issues except for Sundays for some editions), leading to a complete census rather than a sample, guaranteeing no sampling errors and total coverage of the population (Krippendorff, 2018).

As the basis for analysis, the researchers selected individual published items belonging to seven categories: news stories (reporting of actual events or developments), features (analytical or narrative in-depth articles), columns (writers' regular argumentative pieces), editorials (official newspaper positions), opinions (experts' or public's viewpoints contributed), letters to the editor (correspondence from the readers), and advertisements (enabled marketing content). This rather broad classification, deriving from McQuail (2010), made it possible to examine in a

comprehensive manner how SCD was present through various editorial and commercial formats, thus mirroring the newspapers' diverse content ecosystem.

There were strict adherence to the inclusion criteria: for an item to be eligible it had to either refer to or concentrate on Sickle Cell Disease (SCD), with the use of synonyms such as sickle cell anaemia and related terms in Swahili (e.g., "anemia ya selimundu") being permissible. Mentions could either be main (e.g., dedicated articles) or incidental (e.g., brief references in broader health pieces), but unrelated health topics were excluded to maintain focus. This criterion was very effective in ensuring relevance but at the same time, it captured the whole coverage extent from prominent features to marginal allusions (Berelson, 1952).

The data collection process was very organized and involved not only a careful physical but also a digital examination of hard copies when available. Newspapers' hard copies were obtained from public libraries, newspaper vendors, and publishers in Dar es Salaam, with each issue being scrutinized from the first to the last page to pick out and document qualifying items. Besides, digital versions from the newspapers' websites were cross-verified (Mwananchi Digital) to make sure that both printing and online-only content were accounted for. However, the study focused mainly on the print editions, as it considered them the primary medium in Tanzania's context (Media Council of Tanzania, 2024). The entire procedure lasted from July to September 2025, post-study period, during which a coding sheet was employed to register specifics such as item type, date, and SCD relevance. In order to ensure the process was trustworthy, a pilot test on one week's issues helped refine the coding protocol, leading to a very high inter-coder agreement (Cohen's kappa > 0.85) for the subsample that was checked by a second coder (Lacy et al., 2015).

Descriptive statistics were used in data analysis to quantify the extent of the coverage. Frequencies counted all published items and subsets related to SCD, while percentages displayed the proportions of SCD content in comparison to total content. Cross-tabulations split the data by month (April, May, June) and newspaper (Mwananchi vs. Nipashe), unearthing along with the temporal and spatial patterns. Tables and figures were some of the visual aids created using Microsoft Excel and other similar software for better understanding (Riffe et al., 2019). This method offered a simple but solid foundation for measuring the amount of coverage without the use of inferential statistics, given the census design.

Ethical considerations included obtaining institutional clearance from St. Augustine University of Tanzania and adhering to fair use principles for copyrighted materials. No human participants were involved beyond archival review, minimising risks.

5. Findings

This part of the paper provides the quantitative results of the content analysis that was performed on Mwananchi and Nipashe newspapers during the period April 1 to June 30, 2025. The analysis has been organized around the degree of coverage dedicated to Sickle Cell Disease (SCD), with special focus on overall publication volume, SCD-specific items, comparative distribution between newspapers, temporal patterns, and relative representation within broader content. The results indicate an unbelievably low level of coverage marked by a very small number of articles and a huge concentration in one month that SCD is practically non-existent in the media agenda.

5.1 Overall Volume of Published Content

The combined output of the two newspapers over the three-month period was 7,413 items in total for all categories (news stories, features, columns, editorials, opinions, letters to the editor, and advertisements). Mwananchi was responsible for 3,650 items and Nipashe printed 3,763 items, respectively. News stories were the most prevalent, making up 43.7% of the total content (3,240 items), followed by advertisements at 33.9% (2,508 items) and features at 8.3% (612 items). The high overall volume is an indication of strong editorial output and plenty of room for health-related issues including SCD to be discussed. Nonetheless, as the following subsections will show, SCD took up very little of this space which underscores the selective nature of the editorial prioritisation.

5.2 Total SCD-Related Items and Percentage of Total Coverage

Of the total 7,413 published items, just 45 (0.6%) turned out to be SCD-related. The absolute number and percentage are so low that they can only signal a very serious underrepresentation, especially considering that Tanzania has a high burden of SCD (11,000–13,000 annual births). The 45 items covered different formats but were mostly tied to events without any sustained integration into routine reporting. The 0.6% figure is similar to African trends where NCDs receive very limited health coverage (often <2%), but it is still significantly lower than the

communicable diseases' average, indicating the issue's neglect in the setting of the agenda (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

Table 1: Total Published Items vs. SCD-Related Items (1 April–30 June 2025)

Newspaper	Total Items Published	SCD-Related Items	Percentage of SCD Coverage
Mwananchi	3,650	27	0.74%
Nipashe	3,763	18	0.48%
Combined	7,413	45	0.61%

Source: **Content Analysis (2025)**

The combined 0.61% underscores SCD's marginal salience, with coverage amounting to fewer than one SCD item per day across both newspapers over 91 days.

5.3 Distribution by Newspaper (Mwananchi vs. Nipashe)

Mwananchi devoted a somewhat larger number of absolute items to SCD (27) than *Nipashe* (18), which not only indicated its larger total output but also the possibility of its greater resources for special features. Still, in relative terms, *Mwananchi*'s 0.74% slightly exceeded *Nipashe*'s 0.48%, thereby indicating very small differences in editorial focus. The two newspapers showed the same scarcity patterns and therefore, it could not be said that one of the outlets was prioritising SCD as a routine beat. The similarity in patterns points to systemic rather than outlet-specific factors in the low coverage extent.

5.4 Temporal Distribution (Monthly Breakdown – April, May, June)

An impressive discovery is the nonexistence of SCD coverage altogether in April and May, and then the total gathering of all 45 items in June. This peculiar distribution in time matches exactly with World Sickle Cell Awareness Day (19 June), indicating that the reporting was driven by events rather than being proactive. The absence of items in the first two months suggests that SCD was considered unworthy of news outside symbolic events, which also

supports the agenda-setting theory's view that frequency is a major indicator of salience (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

Table 2: Monthly Distribution of SCD-Related Items (1 April–30 June 2025)

Month	Mwananchi SCD Items	Nipashe SCD Items	Combined SCD Items	Percentage of Monthly Total Content Devoted to SCD
April	0	0	0	0%
May	0	0	0	0%
June	27	18	45	1.82% (of June's ~2,470 items)
Total	27	18	45	0.61%

Source: **Content Analysis (2025)**

5.5 Comparison with Other Health Topics or Total Content

In order to magnify SCD's size, its 45 items constituted only 0.61% of the total content which was much less than the prevailing categories such as news stories (43.7%) or advertisements (33.9%). Within health-related content (estimated to be about ~10% - 15% of total output based on previous Tanzanian studies), SCD was probably less than 5%, overshadowed by communicable diseases or by political issues. The difference is shown below.

Table 3: SCD Items as Percentage of Total Content Categories (Combined Newspapers)

Content Category	Total Items	SCD Items	SCD as % of Category	SCD as % of Overall Content
News Stories	3,240	13	0.40%	0.18%
Features	612	22	3.59%	0.30%
Columns	~450*	8	~1.78%	0.11%

Advertisements	2,508	0	0%	0%
Other (Editorials, etc.)	~603*	2	~0.33%	0.03%
Total	7,413	45	-	0.61%

Source: **Content Analysis (2025)**

SCD's almost nonexistent presence in ads and minor categories has effectively stripped away any editorial commercial or reader-engagement value. When one looks at such topics as communicable diseases one can see that SCD was to be expected at the very bottom of the list with its mere 0.61% presence confirming the state of things in the world of chronic NCDs where absence is construed as low-priority issue (Entman, 1993).

The first thing that comes to mind is the issue of very limited coverage of the findings—minimal in quantity (45 items), irregular in distribution (100% June-concentrated), and negligible proportionally (0.61%). This situation not only does not correspond to SCD's public health burden but also directly contributes to its low perceived salience, with consequences for awareness and policy (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

6. Discussion

Alarmingly, the study findings disclose that only a very small area was allocated for Sickle Cell Disease (SCD) in Tanzania's most popular newspapers, Mwananchi and Nipashe, during the period from 1 April to 30 June 2025. The disease, despite being among the most serious non-communicable health issues in Tanzania, has occupied a very small part of the editorial space with only 45 SCD-related items out of 7,413 total published pieces—this is equal to only 0.61% overall. This section interprets these results, explores the implications of event-driven reporting, compares the findings with broader African patterns, and links them back to agenda-setting theory.

The 0.61% figure is not just a little; it denotes a very strong marginalisation. In a situation where Tanzania has 11,000–13,000 SCD births yearly and up to 50% of affected kids die before five years without treatment (Nkya et al., 2019; Ambrose et al., 2020), one would expect the

media to be constantly engaged in a manner proportional to the epidemiological burden. However, SCD gets less than 1% of the total content, which is a fraction that is overshadowed by routine categories such as advertisements (33.9%) and general news stories (43.7%). This unequal distribution points to a systemic editorial deprioritisation, whereby chronic genetic conditions cannot compete with commercially viable or immediately dramatic topics. The low percentage is particularly remarkable considering the fact that the two newspapers together have a daily circulation of more than 68,000 copies, thus providing a huge potential for health education (Media Ownership Monitor Tanzania, 2018). Such a little visibility restricts the chances of myth-busting, screening promotions, or policy advocacy, thus practically making SCD "invisible" in the public discourse of the mainstream for most of the year.

The temporal pattern is just as revealing: there was no SCD coverage at all during April and May, followed by clustering of all 45 items in June. This binomial distribution—no coverage for two months and then sudden increase—strongly indicates event-driven journalism stimulated by World Sickle Cell Awareness Day celebrated on 19 June. SCD visibility is increased by the June concentration but it is shown as an annual commemoration rather than a crisis that needs attention throughout the year. This "awareness day effect" is not uncommon in health reporting particularly in the case of low-resource settings, where editorial calendars coincide with international observances rather than local public health priorities (Adedoyin et al., 2023). The outcome is coverage that is episodic rather than thematic, hence producing an interest from the public that lasts only for a short time and quickly fades away once the symbolic date goes by.

The consequences of such a limited and erratic extent are diverse. In terms of agenda-setting, coverage that is rare transforms into low salience among audience members (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; McCombs and Valenzuela, 2020) and vice versa.

When SCD does not come up more than once a day in two major newspapers put together, it sends a message to the readers of the issue not being an urgent national concern which in the long run leads to what has been termed "public health amnesia"—a public forgetting of chronic diseases in between high-profile events (Emelu, 2023). The effect is that there is no awareness at all, people do not come for treatment early, and the disease continues to be stigmatized especially in places where wrong cultural notions about genetic disorders are still dominant (Bukini et al., 2024). In Tanzania, where chronic diseases get very little media attention, missed

opportunities for sustained awareness are much more expensive, e.g. newborn screening programs and incorporation into the National NCD Strategic Plan would get a major boost if media support was constant (Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly and Children, 2021). Similarly, to the difficulties faced by the Sickle Cell Foundation of Tanzania in maintaining their advocacy amidst lack of news coverage, so do all the other organizations trying to exert policy pressure for increased screening or heightened access to hydroxyurea (Makani et al., 2020).

The Tanzanian data is in complete agreement with the trends noted in sub-Saharan Africa, where SCD and other non-communicable diseases are still receiving less than 2% health media coverage. In Nigeria, Ogunjimi (2019) counted only 203 stories on SCD during three years of four main newspapers; most of them were related to campaigns to raise awareness and only a tiny fraction (less than 1%) of them got published on the front pages. Furthermore, Akintola et al. (2015) came across the fact that 21.4% of the total health content published by South African newspapers had to do with non-communicable diseases and SCD was hardly ever in the news unless it was an announcement from a healthcare facility. Studies conducted in Kenya by Mutua (2020) and Mburu and Odame (2019) reported similar marginalization, with SCD coverage never exceeding 1–2% and being very much clustered around events such as donor-driven or global health days. A study in Ghana by Ampofo and Boateng (2020) found that NCDs accounted for less than 10% of health reporting, thus reinforcing a continent-wide trend where communicable diseases are the ones getting the lion's share of health news (55–70%) due to factors like donor influence, perceived newsworthiness, and so on (Internews, 2018). Tanzania's 0.61% therefore is in line with this larger African pattern of chronic disease neglect; where the low quantity of such coverage is an indication of the existing structural constraints rather than the diseases being irrelevant from an epidemiological point of view.

Referring back to the agenda-setting hypothesis, the very low level of SCD coverage completely undermines the media's role in changing the issue's significance from the media's agenda to the public's agenda (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Frequency and reiteration are the main mechanisms: topics that gain extensive and steady coverage grow in public importance, while those that get sporadic or little attention disappear from the public mindset (McCombs and Valenzuela, 2020). In this instance, the near-missing coverage apart from June is the factor that basically kills the urgency of SCD perceived, even though, in terms of mortality burden, it

is at par or exceeds many infectious diseases that get whopping attention. Next, to the theory's second level—the attribute agenda-setting—the situation becomes worse: in case of very limited coverage, the public receives the perception that the problem is an "annual event" rather than a "daily crisis". Along these lines, Entman's (1993) concept of framing by omission points out that putting the issue in the dark is, in fact, a very powerful framing that gives the impression that SCD is of little to no concern.

To sum up, the 0.61% coverage along with complete silence for two-thirds of the research period, is a clear indication of the Tanzanian print media's failure to perform their agenda-setting role for the deadliest childhood disease of the country. The June spike brings only temporary visibility, and it cannot replace the continuous, proactive reporting that is needed to create awareness, diminish stigma, and facilitate policy change. The issue of this nature calls for conscious editorial approaches to embed SCD in the regular health reporting lines, thus making sure that the disease gets the constant attention equal to its burden.

7. Conclusion

This research aimed to evaluate the level of attention given to Sickle Cell Disease (SCD) by the two most read newspapers in Tanzania, Mwananchi and Nipashe, during the three-month period from April 1 to June 30, 2025. The results are clear: coverage is very limited, sporadic, and mainly depending on certain events. Out of 7,413 items released, only 45 (0.61%) talked about SCD, and all of them were published in June—just in time for World Sickle Cell Awareness Day on June 19—and there were none in April or May. This means that there was no editorials at all for two-thirds of the study period, then there was a short, strong, and quick editorial burst.

The evidence that stands out clearly points to this marginalization: Mwananchi gave only 0.74% and Nipashe 0.48% of their whole content to SCD, which is a very small percentage compared to the main groups such as general news (43.7%) and advertisements (33.9%). There were no editorials, letters to the editor, or paid ads for the disease, which further decreased its appearance in public discourse. This lack and clustering confirm that SCD is not treated as a public health priority that lasts for a year but rather as a commemoration that happens only at the end of the year.

Tanzania is a country that, despite its large number of SCD births, is a place where the majority of affected newborns die still during the first five years lack of early diagnosis and basic care. The implications of this are very serious for public health in the country. The fight against stigma, awareness campaigns, screening of newborns and of couples wanting to have children, intensive support for hydroxyurea and comprehensive care—all these actions require a constant attention from the media around the year. And when the top newspapers give less than 1% of their space to the issue and limit it to one month only, they do not transfer the real weight of SCD to the public agenda, rather they maintain ignorance and delay the acceptance of interventions and policies that are meant to eliminate suffering and death caused by preventable reasons.

8. Recommendations

The introduction of these specific measures would change SCD, which is often forgotten after a year, into a public health priority that is always visible and therefore, media practice will be in accordance with Tanzania's urgent need to face one of its leading yet most neglected causes of child mortality. The following targeted actions are recommended to fill the gaps that have been identified:

1. **Media houses** (*Mwananchi*, *Nipashe*, and others) should proactively schedule regular SCD coverage throughout the year—aiming for at least one SCD-related item per month—-independent of international awareness days. This can be achieved by assigning dedicated health reporters or creating an annual editorial calendar that integrates SCD into routine beats.
2. **Link coverage to the national health calendar** beyond just 19 June. Key dates such as Tanzania's Non-Communicable Diseases Week, National Health Week, or paediatric health months offer natural opportunities for sustained reporting on prevention, patient stories, policy updates, and regional screening initiatives.
3. **Foster partnerships** between newspapers, the Ministry of Health, and organisations like the Sickle Cell Foundation of Tanzania to supply ready story leads, data updates, and expert sources year-round, reducing reliance on one-off events.

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