Policy Briefing:

Home Health Care in Cameroon during COVID-19

Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Town Hall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held in January 2022, focusing on the theme 'Home Health Care: The Way Forward for Health-Related Issues during the COVID-19 Pandemic', presented by Ginyu Innocentia Kwalar, nurse and founder of the Klarah home health care platform.

Context:

COVID-19 deterred patients from attending crowded hospitals, putting people with chronic and life limiting illness at risk. Many Cameroonians in the diaspora care for ageing parents from a distance with little information. At the same time, trained nurses are under employed, and nursing training and regulation in Cameroon are fragmented across ministries and a single order shared with midwives and laboratory technicians.

Key Issues:

1. **Continuity of care for chronic illness:** Patients with hypertension, diabetes, stroke and other long term conditions miss follow up, leading to poor adherence and late recognition of complications.
2. **No framework for home health care:** There is no national standard defining who may provide home nursing, what services it covers, or how quality and safety are assured.
3. **Fragmented nursing qualifications and regulation:** Several ministries train nurses at different levels, making it hard for the public to know who is a qualified nurse.
4. **Equity and cost:** Privately paid home care reaches families who can pay, often with diaspora support; poorer patients are left out.
5. **Safety of home visits:** Insecurity in the North West and South West and the risk of assault in homes affect nurses providing care.

Discussion Highlights:

- Home nursing can relieve hospitals and support chronic disease follow up, and can use nurses' free time without taking them from hospital posts.
- Diaspora families valued regular reports and continuity of care for ageing parents.

- Participants debated whether home care is a luxury in a system with about one provider per 10,000 people; government recruitment of unemployed nurses was raised as the larger issue.
- Standard equipment, continuing education, life support training and clear rights and responsibilities for patients and nurses were suggested.
- Community health worker models for sickle cell disease show a lower cost route to home based care.

Recommendations:

- **Set national standards for home health care:** MINSANTE, with the nursing order, should define home health care services, minimum qualifications (at least state registered nurse), required equipment, record keeping, confidentiality and incident reporting. First step: a working group with nursing schools, the order and existing providers.
- **Clarify nursing qualifications and regulation:** MINSANTE, the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training should harmonise nursing training levels, and the government should consider a separate order or register for nurses so the public can verify qualifications.
- **Recruit and use trained nurses:** MINSANTE should increase recruitment of trained nurses and develop community and home nursing roles, including for chronic disease follow up and post discharge care.
- **Link home care to health facilities:** Regional delegations and hospitals should create referral and reporting links so home care nurses can share records with attending physicians and refer emergencies, building towards shared patient records with consent.
- **Protect access for poorer patients:** Partners, NGOs and diaspora associations should explore subsidised home care for patients who cannot pay, and community health workers should be used for home follow up of conditions such as sickle cell disease.
- **Train home care nurses in emergency skills:** Providers and training schools should include basic life support and communication in mandatory continuing education; diaspora clinicians offered to help teach.

Next Steps: The Chair offered to teach life support modules for Klarah nurses, and a participant running a community sickle cell home care project offered to present at a future session.

Conclusion: Home health care offers a practical way to keep people with chronic illness in care while hospitals are under pressure, and gives trained nurses new roles. To

grow safely and fairly it needs national standards, clear nursing regulation, links to health facilities and a plan for patients who cannot pay.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of January 15, 2022. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWKDC_es8Io