Policy Briefing:

Type 2 Diabetes Remission Through Weight Loss: Implications for Cameroon

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Overview:

This policy briefing synthesises key insights from the Cameroon Town Hall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on 9 April 2022, focusing on the theme "Reversing Type 2 Diabetes," presented by Dr. Eugene Kongnyuy, consultant obstetrician gynaecologist, UNFPA Resident Representative in the Republic of Congo and author of 'No Pills, No Needles'.

Context:

Diabetes and hypertension are rising in Cameroon and across Africa, and participants reported deaths from undiagnosed hyperglycaemia. Patients are usually told diabetes is lifelong and given many general lifestyle tips. The speaker reversed his own diabetes by losing 10 kg and bringing his BMI below 23.

Key Issues:

1. **Remission is possible but rarely discussed:** Significant weight loss can put type 2 diabetes into remission, yet clinicians seldom present this as the main goal.
2. **Overweight is normalised:** Most adults screened in community settings had a BMI above recommended levels; a Unite for Health Foundation screening in Bamenda found none of 560 people within the target. A large belly is still seen as a sign of success.
3. **BMI thresholds may be too high:** Evidence presented suggested diabetes risk rises from a BMI of 23 in low and middle income populations, below the usual cut-off of 25.
4. **Carbohydrate-heavy diets:** Local staples (fufu, cassava, plantain, rice) dominate meals, while dietary advice focuses on food quality more than quantity.
5. **Medication safety during weight loss:** Patients losing weight on insulin or sulphonylureas risk hypoglycaemia if doses are not reviewed.

Discussion Highlights:

- Participants agreed that 'lose weight' should be the main message to patients with type 2 diabetes.

- Intermittent fasting worked for the speaker mainly by reducing total intake; any meal can be skipped if it produces weight loss.
- Changing social norms around body size needs community, religious and traditional leaders and popular role models.
- Bariatric surgery evidence supports weight loss as a route to remission.

Recommendations:

- **Make remission a stated goal of diabetes care:** MINSANTE and the national diabetes programme should include weight loss for remission in type 2 diabetes guidelines. First step: a short clinical note for district hospitals and health centres.
- **Review medication as patients lose weight:** Hospitals and diabetes clinics should train staff to reduce insulin and sulphonylureas as glucose improves and to confirm remission with HbA1c.
- **Screen BMI and glucose in communities:** Regional delegations, with diaspora groups such as Unite for Health Foundation, should expand BMI, blood pressure and glucose screening and refer high-risk people.
- **Give dietary advice that fits local food:** Training schools and dietitians should develop simple Cameroonian guidance on reducing staple carbohydrates and portion size, without calorie counting.
- **Change norms around body size:** MINSANTE should involve religious and traditional leaders, musicians and young role models in campaigns that present a healthy weight as the norm.
- **Generate local evidence:** Universities and researchers should study BMI thresholds and remission outcomes in Cameroonian patients to inform guidelines.

Next Steps: Follow-up session in two weeks (about 23 April 2022), with details to be confirmed. Further questions were taken in the parking lot.

Conclusion: The session showed that type 2 diabetes is not always a life sentence. Putting weight loss at the centre of care, adapting advice to local diets and changing norms about body size could help many Cameroonians avoid lifelong medication and complications.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of April 9, 2022. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0NaztKC4Rk