Policy Briefing:

Telemedicine in Cameroon: Building the Legal and Technical Foundations

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Overview:

This policy briefing synthesises key insights from the Cameroon Town Hall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on 23 April 2022, focusing on digital health and telemedicine in Cameroon, presented by Dr. Alexis Awungia Tazinya, Chief Health Officer of Waspito.

Context:

Cameroon has few doctors, concentrated in Douala and Yaounde. Patients already seek informal advice by phone. Private telemedicine platforms such as Waspito are growing, while the government's 2020 to 2024 digital health strategic plan is still being implemented and no legal framework for telemedicine exists.

Key Issues:

1. **No legal framework:** Telemedicine is not prohibited but not regulated, leaving doubts among clinicians and making some insurers reluctant to pay for remote consultations.
2. **Infrastructure gaps:** Unreliable electricity and internet, and 3G and 4G coverage of about 70 percent, limit access, especially for video.
3. **Data protection:** Cameroon has no national health data protection standard, so platforms align with HIPAA or GDPR, and cyber security policy is weakly implemented.
4. **Fragmented systems:** DHIS2 exists, but electronic records, pharmacy systems and a health worker registry are missing or not interoperable.
5. **Trust:** Some patients and providers doubt that remote consultations are safe or effective.

Discussion Highlights:

- Low-cost instant consultations (3,000 FCFA) can reduce avoidable hospital visits.
- Verification of every doctor with the medical council is a key safeguard.
- Audio and chat options and free reconnection help with poor connectivity.

- Public health communication, including for vaccination, must be adapted to local beliefs and priorities.

Recommendations:

- **Adopt a telemedicine legal framework:** MINSANTE, with the National Medical Council and the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, should finalise regulations on licensing, prescribing, liability and payment for remote care. First step: publish a draft for consultation with clinicians and platforms.
- **Create health worker and facility registries:** MINSANTE should build a public registry of licensed health workers that platforms can use for verification, alongside the existing facility registry.
- **Set national health data standards:** MINSANTE and the national ICT agency should issue rules on confidentiality, consent and cyber security for health data, and interoperability standards linking platforms, electronic records and DHIS2.
- **Allow insurers to cover teleconsultations:** Regulators and insurers should recognise teleconsultations by verified providers as reimbursable services.
- **Expand connectivity for health facilities:** Government and telecom partners should prioritise reliable internet and power for district hospitals and health centres so they can use teleconsultation and referral.
- **Train clinicians in digital health:** Medical and nursing schools and professional bodies should include telemedicine practice and ethics in training to build trust.

Next Steps: Questions on confidentiality and on medical council regulation of telemedicine should be followed up in a later session.

Conclusion: Telemedicine can bring affordable care closer to Cameroonians, but it needs a legal framework, data protection rules, verified providers and reliable connectivity to grow safely.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of April 23, 2022. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lsDNqwf_Ww