Policy Briefing:

Breast Cancer Prevention and Management in Cameroon

Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Town Hall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held in October 2022, focusing on the theme 'Breast Cancer Prevention and Management in Cameroon', presented by Dr. Munoh Kenne Foma, haematologist and oncologist, and Akwi Anjoh, breast cancer survivor and founder of the Dare to Live with Anjoh Foundation.

Context:

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in Cameroon (about 20 percent of cancers). Most women are diagnosed at stage 3 or 4, often young, and many hide symptoms because of stigma. Cameroon has no national screening guideline, receptor testing is often not done, radiotherapy is available in only a few centres, and patients pay for treatment themselves.

Key Issues:

1. **Late diagnosis and stigma:** Women ignore or hide lumps, fear witchcraft accusations and social exclusion, and reach care at advanced stages.
2. **No screening policy:** There is no national guideline, and screening depends on campaigns by NGOs and individual hospitals.
3. **Incomplete pathology:** Oestrogen, progesterone and HER2 receptor tests are often not done, so patients get the wrong treatment or unnecessary surgery.
4. **Limited and unsafe treatment:** Few radiotherapy machines, long waits, chemotherapy without supportive care, and unaffordable targeted drugs.
5. **Financial burden:** Out of pocket costs for chemotherapy, surgery and radiotherapy push patients to abandon treatment or rely on donors.

Discussion Highlights:

- Self examination and clinical breast examination are useful where mammography is scarce, but must be linked to diagnosis and treatment.
- 'No tissue, no issue': receptor status should guide every treatment decision.
- Where radiotherapy is unavailable, mastectomy may be safer than lumpectomy.
- Supplements and faith should support, not replace, treatment.

- Retaining trained oncology staff and creating tumour boards are urgent.

Recommendations:

- **Adopt a national breast cancer screening guideline:** MINSANTE and the National Cancer Control Committee should publish a screening guideline suited to available resources (clinical breast examination for all women, ultrasound or mammography for higher risk and older women) and fund free screening for women aged 40 or 50 and above, in line with WHO guidance.
- **Make receptor testing standard:** MINSANTE and reference hospitals should equip pathology laboratories to test oestrogen, progesterone and HER2 receptors on every breast cancer, with a referral system for samples until local capacity exists.
- **Create multidisciplinary tumour boards:** Cancer centres in Yaounde, Douala and Mbingo should hold regular tumour boards of surgeons, oncologists, pathologists and radiologists, with diaspora specialists joining online.
- **Expand radiotherapy and safe chemotherapy:** MINSANTE should restore non-functional radiotherapy machines, train medical physicists and chemotherapy nurses, and ensure supportive drugs and laboratory monitoring for every chemotherapy unit.
- **Reduce the cost of treatment:** Government should include breast cancer treatment, including tamoxifen and other hormonal drugs, in universal health coverage and essential medicines procurement.
- **Fight stigma through community awareness:** MINSANTE, NGOs such as Dare to Live, churches and community leaders should run awareness campaigns that teach self examination, involve men, and encourage early consultation.

Next Steps: The town hall pledged 500 US dollars to the Dare to Live with Anjoh Foundation, and the Chair offered to join tumour boards in Cameroon. The foundation is working with the National Cancer Control Committee.

Conclusion: Breast cancer in Cameroon is often found late and treated without the information or tools needed. Early detection, complete pathology, multidisciplinary care and financial protection would turn a disease that is often fatal into one that, as in other countries, many women survive.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of October 8, 2022. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Q29IYKXZoI