Policy Briefing:

Closing the Cancer Care Gap in Cameroon: Practical Steps

Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on February 11, 2023, in the week of World Cancer Day, focusing on the theme "Improving Cancer Care and Reducing Mortality in Cameroon: What Can Be Done Today", presented by medical physicist Sidney Tazeh, with contributions from CHAI Cameroon.

Context:

Cameroon records about 15,000 to 16,000 new cancer cases a year, mainly breast, cervical and prostate cancer, and most are diagnosed late. Only one radiotherapy centre, in Douala, was functional, basic cancer medicines were often out of stock, and pathology services were limited. There is no functioning cancer registry and few screening guidelines.

Key Issues:

1. **Late diagnosis:** About 80 to 90 percent of cancers are diagnosed late, because of limited provider skills, no diagnostic guidelines and missing equipment at primary and district levels.
2. **Limited treatment:** Surgery is the main available treatment. Radiotherapy, chemotherapy and hormone therapy are scarce, and patients who can afford only surgery are often lost to follow-up.
3. **Weak pathology:** At one centre only 28.7 percent of breast cancer cases had a pathology report and 2.5 percent a complete one, so treatment decisions are often made without receptor status.
4. **No reliable data:** Without functioning registries or enforced district reporting, the true burden cannot be shown to funders.
5. **Cost of evacuation:** Cancer was described as the leading cause of costly medical evacuations abroad.

Discussion Highlights:

- Prevention and early diagnosis were agreed as the cornerstone of care for now.

- Clinical breast examination, ultrasound, X-ray and CT can support screening and staging without PET or MRI.
- CHAI's partnership with the American Cancer Society aims to supply cancer medicines at about half price.
- Intraoperative radiotherapy was proposed as an affordable route to breast-conserving treatment.

Recommendations:

- **Adopt national screening and referral guidelines:** MINSANTE should publish simple guidelines for early detection and referral of breast, cervical, prostate and lung cancer for health centres and district hospitals, starting with clinical breast examination and cervical screening.
- **Revive cancer data collection:** MINSANTE should include priority cancers in the district health information system with incentives for reporting, and restart the national cancer registry, beginning in the hospitals that treat cancer.
- **Secure the supply of cancer medicines:** MINSANTE, with CHAI and the American Cancer Society, should roll out the discounted medicines agreement to all seven treatment centres within the year, with stock monitoring.
- **Strengthen pathology:** Teaching hospitals and the Ministry of Higher Education should train pathologists, introduce receptor testing and immunohistochemistry in regional centres, and pilot digital pathology for second opinions.
- **Expand affordable treatment:** MINSANTE and hospital boards should assess intraoperative radiotherapy for breast-conserving surgery and complete the business case for the National Cancer Institute, using diaspora expertise.
- **Mentor front-line clinicians:** Diaspora oncologists, radiologists and surgeons should each mentor a clinician in Cameroon through the town hall, and the Cameroon Medical Council should promote continuing education on cancer warning signs.

Next Steps: Participants agreed to connect CHAI with diaspora experts to help finalise the National Cancer Institute business case. The speaker offered to share the Mayo Clinic nodule calculator and to return for further cancer sessions.

Conclusion: Cameroon cannot yet match the cancer care of wealthy countries, but it can reduce deaths now through prevention, early diagnosis and better use of the surgery, imaging and data it already has, while building pathology, medicine supply and radiotherapy.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of February 11, 2023. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69Cd_i0HHOE