Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals

Meeting Minutes, March 11, 2023

Host: Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals

Date: March 11, 2023

Chair: Dr. Munoh Kenne Foma

Co-Moderators: Dr. Katte Jean-Claude (lead moderator), Elvis Ndansi, Dr. Bryan Tegomoh

Guest Speaker: Dr. Guy Sadeu Wafeu, MD (Faculty of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, University of Yaoundé I, 2015), MPH; PhD candidate in epidemiology, University of Montpellier, Coordinator, Building Medical Research in Africa; coordinator of Cochrane Cameroon activities; author of a practical guide to the fundamentals of quantitative health research

Distinguished Guests: Dr. Judwin Ndzo, paediatrician (UK) and Secretary General, CamDoc UK, Dr. Joshua Tambe, radiologist and lecturer, University of Buea, Prof. Mathias Fobi

Title: Enhancing the Quality of Medical Research in Cameroon: Challenges and Opportunities

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Agenda Items:

1. Welcome and opening remarks by the lead moderator, Dr. Katte Jean-Claude, and the Chair
2. Introduction of the speaker
3. Presentation by Dr. Guy Sadeu Wafeu on "Enhancing the Quality of Medical Research in Cameroon: Challenges and Opportunities"
4. Discussion and Q&A
5. Closing remarks and parking lot

Opening Remarks:

- The lead moderator welcomed participants from the US, Europe, Africa and Cameroon to a session on improving medical research in Cameroon.

- Dr. Tegomoh said COVID-19 had shown how critical research is, and recalled the speaker as a mentor who helped many medical students with their theses and statistical analysis.
- The Chair said the speaker had been strongly recommended by his peers and that the session was bilingual, with participants free to speak in English or French. He recalled struggling as a final-year medical student to design and fund his own research.

Presentation Points:

Presentation by Dr. Guy Sadeu Wafeu: "Enhancing the Quality of Medical Research in Cameroon: Challenges and Opportunities"

1. The speaker's work with students:

Dr. Wafeu said he had left clinical practice to concentrate on research. Since 2016 he has coordinated Building Medical Research in Africa, which supports medical students with research design, protocols and statistical analysis, and he works on neglected tropical diseases, cardiovascular and neurological disease.

2. Challenges identified:

As summarised by Dr. Tegomoh, the presentation identified weak research capacity and training, a serious lack of biostatistics skills, an inefficient ethics review environment, and funding that comes mostly from outside the country, with little ownership of research by government.

3. Quality of theses and publication:

In discussion he said many teachers cannot themselves draft a paper or master research methods, so neither students nor supervisors fully understand methodology. Some MD theses are of such low quality that they cannot be published, and many students wrongly believe a paper must carry a professor's name.

4. Opportunities:

He proposed a parallel route to change through free online training, including a planned online course in statistical analysis, since a biostatistics master's in Cameroon costs several million FCFA. His group planned a scientific writing workshop at the end of the year aiming for at least 80 percent of participants to publish. He also called for advocacy, often through informal conversations, by those with access to decision makers.

Discussions and Q&A Session:

- **Participants gave first impressions, including a consultant in Saint Lucia (MD, MPH) and a classmate of the speaker studying biostatistics and epidemiology at Oxford.** The classmate said the challenges presented matched his own experience of research in Cameroon.
- **Dr. Tegomoh asked how government and public institutions could be brought to take ownership of research and finance work on local needs.** Dr. Wafeu said advocacy is the most important lever, especially by people with influence, since many in public service take decisions without considering research evidence.
- **The Chair asked how training of young researchers in medicine, nursing and the sciences could be scaled up so that their work informs policy.** Dr. Wafeu said change may need to come from a parallel system outside institutions, chiefly online training on free platforms specific to Cameroon's health sector, and that trained students can themselves change their teachers' practice.
- **Elvis Ndansi commented on careers, ethics and funding.** Elvis Ndansi said clinical research careers need stable employment beyond the first grant, and offered funding from his foundation for a student to study medication errors in Cameroon. Having served on an ethics committee, Elvis Ndansi said a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant would help digitise ethics submission, which was still paper-based. Elvis Ndansi added that some universities repel grants through bureaucracy and by treating research funds as free money, which keeps them low in African rankings.
- **A participant who had attended an exchange in Uganda asked why Cameroonian master's and PhD students graduate without publications when in Uganda publications are a condition of admission.** Dr. Wafeu pointed to teachers' limited writing skills, the low quality of some studies and myths about publishing. Dr. Joshua Tambe, a radiologist and University of Buea lecturer, said many clinical professors published mainly case reports in local journals and had never corresponded with major journals, that promotion does not reward research quality, and that some leaders obstruct large grants. Dr. Katte noted that East Africa's research ecosystem rests on institutions built over decades.
- **A former student said the speaker's corrections transformed his thesis protocol, and called for research basics to be taught to every clinician. The previous session's presenter asked how research on conditions in people who never reach hospital, such as early chronic kidney disease, is done without electronic records.** Dr. Wafeu said community-based research depends on funding, such as the community trial on loiasis he worked on, while most hospital studies are student theses. The Chair said hospital-based findings should not be generalised: an early 11 percent HIV

prevalence for Cameroon came from antenatal clinic data, while the true figure was much lower. Dr. Katte said all types of research are needed.

- **Dr. Judwin Ndzo raised research integrity (a lecturer listed himself first on her thesis paper), asked how theses can be translated into practice, and asked about diaspora collaboration.** Dr. Ndzo said Cameroon's neonatal sepsis guidelines rested on a small, low-powered 2013 study, and urged audits, guidelines and a focus on maternal and neonatal mortality. Dr. Katte listed exchange programmes (Fulbright, DAAD, programmes with Japan and India, the African Academy of Sciences) and said they are competitive. Dr. Wafeu proposed a platform listing funding and training opportunities. A participant noted that the minister had issued a memorandum on how the ministry will work with diaspora platforms.
- **A medical school lecturer in anatomy, studying for a master's in Belgium, said separating the ministries of higher education and scientific research is a problem, and that research methods should be taught from the fourth year.** The lecturer said more lecturers were taking MPH and epidemiology degrees to supervise students better. The speaker's Oxford classmate urged a research agenda aimed at impact, mentoring of young researchers, multidisciplinary teams and confidence to lead; A participant from the University of Calgary proposed requiring one publication before thesis work and offered to build a website listing grants for African researchers, which Dr. Wafeu welcomed.
- **The director of a district hospital in the North West and a regional focal point of Building Medical Research in Africa, described applying research skills in a rural hospital.** About 7 in 10 newborns in his hospital developed fever on day two or three. Staff attributed this to visitors carrying babies and posted notices, but with no evidence, so he designed a questionnaire study of mothers to find the real causes. He said empowering young clinicians with research skills improves care in rural areas.
- **Dr. Tambe gave closing comments.** Dr. Tambe said Cameroon has great researchers but weak institutions. At the University of Buea, students present protocols to a faculty panel, give seminars and pass a pre-defence before the final thesis defence. Dr. Tambe stressed bringing statisticians in from the start: a statistician brought in at the end performs an autopsy.

Call to Action and Closing:

- Elvis Ndansi announced a protocol review service and trial planning grants (Design, Analyze and Communicate) to be hosted in Cameroon at the Clinton Health Access Initiative and launched in May, with a dedicated town hall session to follow.

- The Chair thanked the speaker, urged members to try ChatGPT while noting its errors, and said research should aim to change policy, not only to be published.
- The next session, in two weeks, was announced.
- Participants moved to the parking lot.

Next Meeting

In two weeks (March 25, 2023): Challenges and Opportunities in the Practice of Implementation Science in Cameroon, with Dr. Ferdinand C. Mukumbang.

Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JC3ffjLEihw

Submitted by: Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals