Policy Briefing:

Raising the Quality of Medical Research in Cameroon

Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on March 11, 2023, focusing on the theme "Enhancing the Quality of Medical Research in Cameroon: Challenges and Opportunities", presented by Dr. Guy Sadeu Wafeu, coordinator of Building Medical Research in Africa.

Context:

Most medical research in Cameroon is produced through student theses, supervised by clinicians who are often not trained in research methods, and funded largely from abroad. Participants from Cameroon and the diaspora described low publication rates, weak biostatistics capacity, slow paper-based ethics review and institutions that discourage grants.

Key Issues:

1. **Weak research training and supervision:** Students and some supervisors lack grounding in methods and biostatistics; theses are often unpublishable.
2. **Low publication and integrity concerns:** Myths that a professor must co-author, misplaced authorship, and promotion systems that do not reward quality discourage good publishing.
3. **Funding and institutional barriers:** Research relies on external funders whose priorities may differ, while university bureaucracy can block or divert grants.
4. **Research that does not inform practice:** National guidelines can rest on small studies, and hospital-based findings are sometimes generalised to the population.
5. **Fragmented governance:** Higher education and scientific research sit in separate ministries.

Discussion Highlights:

- The University of Buea's protocol panels, seminars and pre-defence were cited as a model for thesis quality.
- Bringing statisticians in at the design stage, not after data collection, was stressed.
- A rural district hospital study of neonatal sepsis showed how clinicians can use research skills locally.

- Digital ethics submission and a protocol review service with trial planning grants were announced for Cameroon.

Recommendations:

- **Reform thesis supervision:** Medical and health faculties should adopt protocol review panels, seminars and a pre-defence for all theses, as in Buea, and teach research methods and biostatistics from the fourth year. A first step is a joint deans' meeting to agree common standards.
- **Train supervisors and support publication:** Faculties, with Cochrane Cameroon and diaspora partners, should run regular scientific writing and statistics courses for lecturers and students, with clear authorship rules based on contribution.
- **Remove barriers to grants:** University leadership should adopt transparent grant management rules that release funds as budgeted to investigators and recognise externally funded research in promotion.
- **Fund national priorities:** MINSANTE and the Ministry of Scientific Research should create a small competitive fund for community-based studies on priority problems such as maternal and neonatal mortality, and link it to guideline development.
- **Digitise ethics review:** The National Ethics Committee should complete online submission and review, building on the grant announced.
- **Share opportunities:** The town hall and diaspora associations such as CamDoc UK should maintain a shared list of funding, mentorship and exchange opportunities for Cameroonian researchers and make full use of existing university agreements.

Next Steps: The next session (March 25, 2023) would continue the theme with implementation science. A dedicated session on the DAC protocol review service was planned after its launch in May, and the speaker and participants agreed to collaborate on a platform listing funding opportunities.

Conclusion: Cameroon has capable researchers at home and abroad, but weak institutions limit the quality and use of research. Stronger supervision, transparent grant management, early involvement of statisticians and shared opportunities could raise the quality of work and its value for policy.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of March 11, 2023. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JC3ffjLEihw