Policy Briefing:

Policy Briefing: Lessons from Cancer Care at Mbingo Baptist Hospital

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Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on August 26, 2023 (82nd edition), focusing on the theme "Treating Cancer in Cameroon: The Mbingo Baptist Hospital Experience," presented by Dr. Francine Kouya and her team.

Context:

Most cancer patients in Cameroon pay for scans, drugs and surgery themselves and arrive at an advanced stage. Radiotherapy is concentrated in Douala and Yaoundé, far from patients in the North West. Mbingo Baptist Hospital runs one of the few comprehensive cancer programmes in the country, with paediatric and adult oncology, pharmacy, pathology, palliative care, survivorship follow-up and a hospital-based registry.

Key Issues:

1. **Cost and abandonment:** Without insurance, families struggle with transport, food and follow-up, and many abandon treatment. Mbingo pays transport, provides welcome packages and a parents' home to keep children in care.
2. **Radiotherapy access:** Patients referred from the North West to Douala often never reach radiotherapy. Mbingo is building a radiotherapy bunker that needs further funding.
3. **Diagnosis:** Staging is often unaffordable (about 100,000 FCFA for a CT), image-guided biopsy is limited, and immunohistochemistry is not available locally.
4. **Data:** Cameroon has one population-based registry, in Yaoundé. Mbingo's hospital-based registry (Resonance and CanReg5) could feed a national system but lacks dedicated staff and follow-up.
5. **Drug access and quality:** Medicines are expensive and their quality on the open market is uncertain, which affects outcomes.

Discussion Highlights:

- Teamwork, palliative care, survivorship follow-up and family support make cancer care possible even with limited resources.
- Work with parents and traditional healers improved early referral of children.
- Participants proposed asking MINSANTE to support cancer treatment as it does HIV and tuberculosis.
- Sustainability was raised repeatedly as the main risk for the programme.
- Partners such as RAD-AID and CHAI offered concrete routes for training and cheaper medicines.

Recommendations:

- **Bring cancer into public financing:** MINSANTE should study support for cancer treatment along the lines of the HIV and tuberculosis programmes, starting with childhood cancers. First step: the town hall and the diaspora health committee send the Minister a letter with costed proposals.
- **Complete radiotherapy in the North West:** MINSANTE, CBC Health Services and partners should fund and staff the Mbingo radiotherapy bunker. First step: a funding roundtable with diaspora organisations and partners such as RAD-AID.
- **Strengthen diagnosis:** Hospitals and partners should train radiologists in image-guided biopsy and equip pathology for immunohistochemistry in the North West. First step: diaspora interventional radiologists organise visiting training at Mbingo.
- **Build on hospital-based registries:** MINSANTE and the National Cancer Control Committee should fund data managers and link hospital registries such as Mbingo's to a national system. First step: agree common CanReg5 fields with the Yaoundé registry.
- **Secure affordable, quality medicines:** MINSANTE should complete the revolving fund for discounted cancer medicines negotiated by CHAI, and hospitals should buy directly from approved manufacturers meanwhile. First step: Mbingo contacts CHAI Cameroon.
- **Support families and fundraising:** The Ministry of Territorial Administration should allow approved public appeals for cancer care, and the diaspora should fund transport, food and caregiver support. First step: a pilot media appeal for the Mbingo programme.

Next Steps: Town hall leaders were to follow up with the Mbingo team on a priority list of needs. RAD-AID and other partners offered to work directly with the team. The next session was set for two weeks later.

Conclusion: Mbingo shows that organised, humane cancer care is possible in Cameroon. Keeping it going needs public financing, radiotherapy close to patients, better diagnosis and steady partnerships.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of August 26, 2023. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lYnN4wCeVxo