Policy Briefing:

Policy Briefing: Using Social Media and Community Outreach to Reduce Maternal Mortality in Cameroon

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Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held in September 2023, focusing on the theme "Use of Social Media to Improve Maternal Health in Cameroon," presented by Dr. Gwanyama Noella, founder of Talk Pregnancy with Dr. Noella.

Context:

Cameroon's maternal mortality ratio was given as 406 per 100,000 live births in 2020, far above the SDG target of 70. In the North West, the crisis and COVID-19 coincided with a rise in maternal deaths at Bamenda Regional Hospital. Studies cited in the session found that up to 44.5% of women who died had no antenatal care. Social media now reaches large numbers of women who would not otherwise get accurate pregnancy information.

Key Issues:

1. **Low antenatal care uptake:** Many women who die never attended antenatal care, so risks such as hypertension and haemorrhage are not identified.
2. **Cost and access:** Antenatal care is not free, displaced women start late, and facilities in conflict areas have been burned.
3. **Beliefs and trust:** Some religious leaders and family members discourage caesarean sections and hospital care.
4. **Incomplete data:** Hospital-based figures may miss deaths at home, and the four delays in seeking, reaching and receiving care are not tracked.
5. **Gaps in services for vulnerable groups:** Pregnancy follow-up is not part of the GBV pathway for rape survivors.

Discussion Highlights:

- A doctor-led social media channel reached close to 900,000 views in under two years.
- Religious leaders can be engaged as allies when given accurate information.

- Community health workers can find and refer pregnant women not in care.
- The Ondo State experience in Nigeria offers a model for linking birth attendants to facilities.
- Maternal death audits and reliable data are needed to target action.

Recommendations:

- **Make antenatal care free under UHC:** MINSANTE should include a full package of antenatal visits and basic tests in the next phase of Universal Health Coverage, starting with displaced women and adolescents. First step: cost the package for the North West and South West.
- **Task community health workers with finding pregnant women:** Regional delegations should train community health workers to identify every pregnant woman in their area, refer high-risk cases, and record antenatal care status. First step: scale the Wum training model to other health districts with high maternal deaths.
- **Train religious and community leaders:** Regional delegations, hospitals and faith bodies should run pilot sessions for pastors, imams and traditional leaders on danger signs, caesarean section and antenatal care. First step: the pilot in Bamenda offered by the Town Hall.
- **Strengthen maternal death surveillance:** MINSANTE should extend maternal death audits to community deaths, with a reporting line and regular public reports, drawing on the UK confidential enquiry model and the Ondo State programme. First step: a community death notification pilot in one North West health district.
- **Support trusted digital health education:** MINSANTE and partners should recognise and support clinician-led social media education, and add pregnancy follow-up to the GBV care pathway. First step: a referral link between GBV services and antenatal clinics at Bamenda Regional Hospital.

Next Steps: The Town Hall offered to facilitate and help fund a faith leader training pilot in Bamenda. A participant offered to connect the Town Hall with the Ondo State programme lead. The next session was set for two weeks later.

Conclusion: The session showed that a single doctor using social media, with volunteers and small grants, can reach many women. Free antenatal care, community outreach, engagement of faith leaders and better data are needed to bring Cameroon's maternal mortality down.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of September 23, 2023. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGxLldONWOM