Policy Briefing:

The Silent Epidemic of Heart Disease in Cameroon

Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on November 18, 2023, focusing on the theme "The Silent Epidemic of Heart Disease in Cameroon," presented by Dr. Clarence Pingpoh, cardiac surgeon at Bern University Hospital, and Dr. Nchang Taka, interventional cardiologist in Columbus, Georgia.

Context:

Hypertension, diabetes and obesity are rising in Cameroon, and hypertensive heart disease is the leading cause of heart failure in Africa. Few people with hypertension are diagnosed and controlled, and coronary artery disease is often fatal because cath labs and cardiac surgery are available in very few places.

Key Issues:

1. **Missed diagnosis:** Primary care is not set up to screen for cardiovascular risk, and many health facilities lack a working ECG machine.
2. **Too few patients reach specialists:** Without referral pathways, cath labs and surgeons cannot do the volume of cases needed to stay skilled.
3. **Limited testing:** Treadmill stress tests are scarce, and nuclear testing faces isotope supply problems.
4. **Programmes that do not last:** Visiting missions without local training, poor maintenance and unpaid bills have led past centres to decline.
5. **Hard to work with the diaspora:** Diaspora specialists report resistance from institutions, no clear entry points and no cover for their costs.

Discussion Highlights:

- Start with free, simple screening protocols in primary care and build volume before investing in emergency systems.
- Government involvement and local training were seen as essential to sustainability.
- Mission hospitals, Douala General Hospital and Mercy Ships were named as entry points.

- A year long ECG curriculum for medical students was offered by diaspora cardiologists.
- A diaspora task group for a cardiovascular programme was proposed.

Recommendations:

- **Adopt a national cardiovascular screening protocol:** MINSANTE should issue a simple primary care protocol to screen adults with smoking, diabetes, hypertension or family history, assess chest pain and refer for testing, and track compliance in the main hospitals. First step: pilot the protocol in selected hospitals in Yaoundé and collect data on the patients identified.
- **Put an ECG in every health facility:** MINSANTE and regional delegations should require a working ECG machine in every district hospital and train nurses and doctors to use it. First step: a survey of ECG availability in district hospitals.
- **Build referral networks and stress testing:** University hospitals should set up exercise stress testing with remote reading and clear referral routes to cardiologists and cath labs. First step: name referral centres in Yaoundé for the pilot.
- **Plan cath labs with trained teams:** MINSANTE, academic partners and diaspora specialists should plan cath labs and cardiac surgery around training and case volume, starting in Yaoundé and extending to the regions, with rotating diaspora specialists and partner hospitals. First step: a joint task group with the Ministry's diaspora committee to draft a programme outline.
- **Train students and reform internal medicine teaching:** Training schools should give medical and nursing students hands on ECG and cardiovascular training. First step: launch the diaspora ECG curriculum with students recruited through the town hall.
- **Raise public awareness:** MINSANTE and regional delegations should run hypertension, diabetes and chest pain campaigns on CRTV, local radio and social media.

Next Steps: A sign up list was to be circulated to form a task group on sustainable cardiovascular care, and the Chair was to seek a hearing with the Minister. A US-based cardiologist and Dr. Taka offered an ECG curriculum for medical students. The next session was on HIV.

Conclusion: Speakers agreed that Cameroon has the diaspora expertise to build cardiovascular care, but that it must start with screening in primary care, local training and government backing, so that specialist services have the patients and staff to last.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of November 18, 2023. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVs1ApsPBsM