Policy Briefing:

Precision Oncology in Cameroon: Starting with the Basics

Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on September 7, 2024, focusing on the theme "Empowering Precision Oncology in Africa: The New Frontier in Cancer Care," presented by Dr. Munoh Kenne Foma, Chair of the town hall.

Context:

Breast, cervical and prostate cancer are the most common cancers in Cameroon, and all can be treated more effectively and often more cheaply when the tumour is properly characterised. Yet most cancers never receive a pathology diagnosis and very few breast cancers are tested for hormone receptors or HER2.

Key Issues:

1. **Diagnosis:** Fewer than 20% of cancers are confirmed by histopathology and fewer than 10% of those get receptor testing; HER2 testing is concentrated at Centre Pasteur or sent abroad.
2. **Wrong treatment:** Patients receive chemotherapy or surgery they may not need because tumours are not characterised or staged.
3. **Workforce:** About 0.25 pathologists per million people, few radiation oncologists, two working linear accelerators, and limited palliative care.
4. **Access to drugs:** Most targeted drugs and all immunotherapy are unavailable; patients import from India or travel.
5. **Research:** Africa is largely absent from cancer trials, so evidence does not reflect its patients.

Discussion Highlights:

- Receptor testing costs (86,000 at Mbingo; about 172,000 FCFA elsewhere) are far lower than the cost of unnecessary chemotherapy.
- Mbingo was cited as a model of good practice despite long turnaround times for tests sent abroad.
- Speakers called for registries, trial readiness and use of COVID-era sequencing machines for cancer.

- AI and collaboration between hospitals were seen as ways to close the gap.

Recommendations:

- **Make tumour characterisation standard:** MINSANTE and hospitals should require histopathology for every suspected cancer and every surgical specimen, and hormone receptor and HER2 testing for every breast cancer before treatment. First step: a national directive and a price-capped testing package at regional hospitals.
- **Build immunohistochemistry capacity in the regions:** MINSANTE, university hospitals and private partners should set up quality assured immunohistochemistry in each major cancer centre, starting with Douala and Yaoundé public hospitals, with sample transport from the North West and South West. First step: equip one public laboratory and link Mbingo and Bamenda to it.
- **Use existing sequencing machines for cancer:** The national public health laboratory and reference hospitals should assess using COVID-era sequencing platforms for cancer panels, with diaspora bioinformatics support.
- **Train pathologists, oncologists and palliative care teams:** Training schools should expand pathology and radiation oncology posts and add palliative care training; diaspora specialists can teach through the Give Back Project. First step: incentives for residents choosing pathology.
- **Create a cancer registry and prepare for trials:** MINSANTE, ethics committees and universities should support an electronic cancer registry and simplify approval for oncology trials, including phase four studies. First step: a registry pilot at Mbingo and one public hospital.
- **Negotiate access to essential targeted drugs:** MINSANTE should prioritise off-patent targeted drugs (imatinib, tamoxifen, aromatase inhibitors, trastuzumab biosimilars, rituximab) on the essential medicines list and negotiate bulk prices.

Next Steps: The town hall planned its next session in two weeks. The Chair said he intends to invest in an immunohistochemistry laboratory to make testing available in the regions.

Conclusion: Precision oncology in Cameroon starts with basic pathology and receptor testing, which save money and lives now. Participants agreed that collaboration, data, training and targeted investment can close a gap that looks wide but is not out of reach.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of September 7, 2024. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HlJPOo98jlc