Policy Briefing:

Mental Health in Cameroon: From Silence to Safe Spaces and Services

Overview:

This brief draws on a session of the Cameroon Town Hall for Healthcare Professionals held on May 30, 2026, during Mental Health Awareness Month. Dr. Bih Bikelle, a Cameroonian-trained psychiatrist practising in the United States, spoke on stigma and safe conversations, and participants in Cameroon and the diaspora discussed suicide among health workers, the crisis-affected regions and gaps in services.

Context:

Mental illness is common in Cameroon, but it is widely attributed to spiritual causes, hidden by families and addressed only in crisis. Participants described the Jamot service in Yaoundé as the main public psychiatric resource, a few psychiatrists in private practice, almost no trained counsellors and little mental health content in medical curricula. Two medical student suicides and the recent suicide of a colleague at a referral hospital were reported. Displaced families in the North West and South West live with trauma, and psychosocial programmes there lack funding.

Key Issues:

1. **Stigma and silence:** Families hide mental illness for fear of shame and seek spiritual help first, delaying treatment.
2. **Too few professionals:** There are very few psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, psychologists or counsellors, and few doctors choose psychiatry.
3. **Health worker suicide:** Medical students and doctors are at high risk and have no structured support.
4. **Hidden trauma:** Child sexual abuse, domestic violence, harsh discipline and conflict-related trauma go unaddressed.
5. **Substance use:** Alcohol misuse is normalised and other drugs are widely available to young people.

Discussion Highlights:

- Dr. Bikelle: mental illness is treatable, and recovery happens every day.
- Dr. Bikelle: listen without judgement, validate, and support practically.

- Dr. Bikelle: you cannot give from an empty cup; health workers need self-care.
- A UK-based doctor: ask every patient how life is going.
- Dr. Foma: train psychiatric nurses and medical psychologists, not just more doctors.

Recommendations:

- **Integrate mental health into primary care:** MINSANTE and regional delegations should add brief mental health screening to routine consultations and train general practitioners and nurses in supportive care and referral, using the WHO mhGAP approach. First step: pilot screening and referral in district hospitals of one region.
- **Train a mental health workforce:** MINSANTE, the Ministry of Higher Education and training schools should create psychiatric nursing, clinical psychology and counsellor training programmes and strengthen psychiatry in medical curricula. Diaspora psychiatrists can support training virtually.
- **Protect health workers and students:** Faculties of medicine, hospitals and the Cameroon Medical Council should set up confidential counselling, peer support and postvention teams after a suicide, and include mental health in continuing professional development. First step: establish a support service at faculties and hospitals that have recently lost students or staff.
- **Fund psychosocial support in crisis-affected regions:** MINSANTE, the Ministry of Social Affairs and humanitarian partners should fund psychological first aid and psychosocial support for displaced children and families in the North West, South West and Far North, training teachers, health and social workers.
- **Work with faith leaders and communities:** Regional delegations should train pastors, traditional and community leaders in warning signs and referral, and run campaigns in local languages that present mental illness as treatable.
- **Collect baseline data:** The town hall, with partners, should conduct a survey of mental health needs and services to inform the Ministry.

Next Steps: The town hall will work with Dr. Bikelle on a baseline survey, hold a second, more informal session on mental health, and raise mental health training and services with the Ministry of Public Health.

Conclusion: Mental illness is common and treatable, but silence keeps Cameroonians from care. Safe conversations at home, trained professionals and services that work alongside faith and community can turn crises into recovery.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of May 30, 2026. Recording to follow.