Policy Briefing:

Expanding Access to Medical Oxygen in Cameroon

Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Town Hall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on October 9, 2021, focusing on the theme "Access to Medical Oxygen in Cameroon: A Call to Action," presented by Dr. Yauba Saidu, Acting Country Director of the Clinton Health Access Initiative in Cameroon.

Context:

COVID-19 exposed long-standing gaps in Cameroon's oxygen supply. A Ministry of Public Health task force created in May 2021 surveyed about 130 facilities and produced a five-year national strategy, validated in September 2021, with a budget of about US$228 million that was about 2.2 percent funded at the time.

Key Issues:

1. **No policy, standards or financing:** No policy on clinical oxygen use, no standards for import and distribution, no pricing guidance; patients paid an average of about US$18 per day out of pocket.
2. **Insufficient and unreliable supply:** Fewer than 500 cylinders nationally, imports with three-week lead times, and only about three of nine PSA plants functioning. Most of the population lives beyond reach of a facility with oxygen.
3. **Delivery, monitoring and skills:** Shortages of pulse oximeters, blood gas analysers, high-flow and CPAP devices and airway equipment, and clinicians unsure how to titrate oxygen. Cameroon had no respiratory therapists.
4. **No data on hypoxaemia:** Only about 15 percent of facilities record hypoxaemia data and none in a standard format; deaths from lack of oxygen, including during referral, are not measured.

Discussion Highlights:

- Equipment must match each facility's power, size and maintenance capacity, or it will fail as earlier concentrators did.
- Plant operating costs of 30 to 60 percent of capital cost require a management model; a public-private partnership was proposed.

- Inexpensive devices (pulse oximeters, ABG analysers, end-tidal CO2 monitors, air compressors) determine whether oxygen reaches the patient safely and economically.
- Diaspora intensivists and pulmonologists offered to help build training modules.

Recommendations:

- **Fund and protect the oxygen budget line:** MINSANTE and the Ministry of Finance should give the new medical oxygen budget line a defined amount in the annual state budget and ring-fence it for the national strategy. First step: publish the 2022 allocation.
- **Adopt policy, standards and pricing for medical oxygen:** MINSANTE should issue a policy on clinical oxygen use, norms for import and distribution, and a price ceiling for oxygen in public facilities, so that cost does not decide survival.
- **Prioritise the point of care:** MINSANTE and partners should ensure every health centre and district hospital has pulse oximeters, and that reference hospitals have blood gas analysers, high-flow, CPAP and BiPAP devices, air compressors and end-tidal CO2 monitoring, alongside plants and cylinders.
- **Train the oxygen workforce:** MINSANTE, regional delegations and training schools should roll out hands-on oxygen therapy training for doctors and nurses, with modules co-developed with diaspora specialists, and study a training pathway for respiratory therapists.
- **Plan maintenance and management before installation:** MINSANTE should agree a management model (such as a public-private partnership with operators) and maintenance contracts for each PSA plant before commissioning.
- **Measure hypoxaemia and referral deaths:** MINSANTE should add standard hypoxaemia indicators to the national health information system, and emergency physicians and universities should study deaths during referral to inform investment in ambulances.

Next Steps: The Minister of Public Health agreed in principle to present his health sector transformation plan to the diaspora at a future town hall. Training of trainers was planned with emergency physicians in Yaoundé, with diaspora volunteers.

Conclusion: Cameroon now has a defined, partly funded national oxygen strategy. Its success will depend on sustained funding, matching equipment to facilities, maintenance, and training clinicians to deliver oxygen safely at every level of the health pyramid.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of October 9, 2021. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEnw8Zf7XOI