# Policy Briefing:

## Customer Care in Healthcare Facilities in Cameroon and Its Impact on Health-Seeking Behaviour

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**Overview:**

This policy briefing synthesises key insights from the 28th edition of the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, held in July 2021, focusing on the theme "Customer Care in Healthcare Facilities in Cameroon: Impact on Health-Seeking Behaviour."

**Context:**

The topic arose from the previous session on sickle cell disease, where a doctor living with the condition said fear of how he would be treated in hospital was worse than the crisis itself. Participants, including doctors, nurses, an HIV researcher and mothers who had delivered in Cameroon, described how disrespect, poor communication and lack of empathy keep patients away from facilities, push women towards home births and weaken retention in HIV care.

**Key Issues:**

1. **Poor client experience deters care:** Rude reception, dismissal of pain (notably in labour) and breaches of confidentiality lead patients to delay care, use herbalists or deliver at home.
2. **Working conditions:** Heavy caseloads (about 50 consultations a day), low pay and second jobs drive burnout and, in some cases, informal charges to patients.
3. **Weak accountability:** Complaints rarely lead to action, reported staff may be protected by connections, and regulatory sanctions are uncommon.
4. **Ethics gaps in training:** Ethics and customer service receive little time in medical and nursing curricula and almost none in continuing education.
5. **Bypassing primary care:** With about 94 percent of health spending out of pocket and health centres often lacking water and staff, patients go straight to referral hospitals, adding to congestion.

**Discussion Highlights:**

- Satisfaction with services was described as one of the strongest determinants of access and of retention in HIV care.

- Cases of HIV testing without consent were reported, and stigma was said to be perpetuated within the health system.
- Rwanda was cited as an example where leadership has made HIV services accountable.
- Carers accompanying patients are a frequent source of conflict and need clear information on arrival.
- Recognising staff who treat patients well matters as much as sanctioning poor conduct.

**Recommendations:**

- **Patient feedback at every facility:** MINSANTE and regional delegations should require hospitals to run a short exit survey and a complaints channel managed by a patient satisfaction unit independent of the director, with results used in staff appraisal and recognition. First step: pilot in one regional hospital and one district hospital per region.
- **Patients' charter:** MINSANTE should publish a patients' bill of rights in English and French, to be displayed and handed out at reception, covering consent, confidentiality and how to complain. Reception or customer service desks should also brief carers on what to expect.
- **Ethics and communication in training:** Faculties of medicine, nursing and midwifery schools and laboratory training institutions should teach ethics, consent, confidentiality and client care across all years, not as a single course. Regional delegations should add these topics to continuing education, starting with maternity and HIV care staff.
- **Working conditions and fair postings:** MINSANTE should review pay and workload norms for public health workers and test district-level recruitment, so that staff apply for posts they are willing to serve in.
- **Accountability through professional bodies:** The medical, nursing and laboratory professional orders should publish complaint procedures and act on substantiated cases, with clear protection from interference by connected individuals.
- **Strengthen the first level of care:** MINSANTE and partners should equip health centres with water, staff and basic diagnostics and inform communities about the health pyramid, so that referral hospitals can focus on complex cases.

**Next Steps:** The Town Hall will keep the topic open in future sessions. Members in leadership posts were asked to start training and audit with feedback in their own facilities.

**Conclusion:** The session showed that customer care is a barrier to health-seeking behaviour on the same level as cost and distance. Participants agreed that the same professionals perform well where systems hold them accountable and support them, so change must combine training, feedback, fair conditions and leadership.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of July 3, 2021. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-sJRp-69EfI