Policy Briefing:

Expanding Access to Preventive Health in Cameroon

Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the 53rd Cameroon Town Hall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on June 18, 2022, focusing on the theme "Increasing Access to Preventive Health in Cameroon," presented by Dr. Agbor Ashu, co-founder and Medical Director of Healthlane.

Context:

NCDs caused about 35 percent of deaths in Cameroon in 2018, driven by urbanisation, inactivity and diet. The health system is organised around curative care; prevention policies exist on paper but are weakly applied, and insurers do not pay for preventive checks.

Key Issues:

1. **A curative system:** Wellness and prevention services have no regulatory category, and occupational health checks are often formalities.
2. **No financing for prevention:** Insurers do not cover preventive checks, so screening is paid out of pocket and largely limited to urban, better-off clients.
3. **Weak implementation of NCD policies:** Tobacco, alcohol and physical activity policies are poorly enforced, and prevention needs ministries beyond Public Health.
4. **Low awareness and harmful beliefs:** Obesity seen as prosperity, little awareness of adult vaccine boosters, and reliance on untested supplements and concoctions.

Discussion Highlights:

- Personal test results motivated more than half of Healthlane clients to change behaviour.
- Cancer prevention (HPV vaccination, breast, colorectal and liver cancer prevention) is a major opportunity.
- Neonatal sickle cell screening was limited to a few hospitals in Yaoundé and Douala.
- A One Health civil society network was active in Cameroon.

Recommendations:

- **Bring prevention into insurance and public financing:** MINSANTE and the insurance regulator should require health insurance products to cover a defined annual preventive package (blood pressure, glucose, lipids, cancer screening by age) and include it in universal health coverage plans. First step: a workshop with insurers, as proposed at the session.
- **Create a regulatory category for preventive services:** MINSANTE should define standards and a licensing category for wellness and preventive health services so they can be quality-assured and integrated with referral pathways.
- **Make occupational health checks meaningful:** The Ministry of Labour and employers, starting with the public service as the largest employer, should ensure workers receive and understand their screening results, with follow-up for those at risk.
- **Promote adult immunization and cancer screening:** MINSANTE and regional delegations should publicise adult booster vaccines and HPV vaccination, and expand access to mammography and other screening beyond Yaoundé and Douala.
- **Generate local evidence:** Researchers, universities and private providers should partner to study the effect of preventive programmes in Cameroon, using data already collected by services such as Healthlane.
- **Extend neonatal sickle cell screening:** MINSANTE should expand neonatal sickle cell screening beyond the few hospitals in Yaoundé and Douala and support premarital screening and counselling.

Next Steps: A monkeypox session was planned for two weeks later, and a future workshop on insurance coverage for preventive care was proposed.

Conclusion: Prevention offers Cameroon the greatest return against rising NCDs, but it needs financing, regulation and public awareness to move beyond a service for the urban few. Private initiatives show demand exists; public policy must now make prevention part of the health system.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of June 18, 2022. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFVvpJUH3Mk