

Review

Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Cameroon: A statement from the Cameroon Bioethics Initiative

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SUMMARY

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has caused devastating consequences across economies in the world, with substantial effects on lives and livelihoods. Cameroon has been one of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa with an increasing number of cases and fatalities from the disease. In an effort to support the government's response to the epidemic, the Cameroon Bioethics Initiative (CAMBIN); a not-for-profit, non-governmental, non-political, non-discriminatory, multidisciplinary association issued a statement on COVID-19, primarily targeting the government and the general public. In this article, we situate the context within which the statement was issued and present the statement in its entirety.

Introduction

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 was declared in Cameroon on March 6, 2020 (CGTN Africa, 2020). In a bid to contain rapid

spread of the disease, on March 17, 2020 the government of Cameroon, through the Office of the Prime Minister, prescribed a number of control measures including but not limited to: suspension of international travel except for cargo flights, ships

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and vehicles transporting essential goods; reduction in the operation hours of bars, restaurants and leisure spots; prohibition of social gatherings of more than 50 people; a ban on the overloading of buses, taxis and motorbikes; urban and inter-urban travel restrictions; regulation of consumer flow in markets and shopping centres; and strict compliance with the rules of hygiene and social distancing as laid down by the WHO (Republic of Cameroon. Office of the Prime Minister, 2020a). By March 24, the number of infected cases had risen to 66 with hotspots in three major cities namely Yaoundé, Douala and Bafoussam and the Prime Minister's office issued a follow-up communique reemphasizing the importance of complying with earlier proposed measures, noting that the majority of the public were not adhering to the prescribed public health measures (Republic of Cameroon. Office of the Prime Minister, 2020b). To enable compliance, sanctions were then prescribed for defaulters, although it is not clear the extent to which the proposed sanctions were being enforced legally. It was also stressed that "no decision to confine the population, totally or partially, has been prescribed by the Head of State".

On April 9, 2020, seven new measures were issued by the Office of the Prime Minister to increase the effectiveness of the measures being implemented in the fight against the disease following two consultative working sessions with representatives of religious denominations and leaders of political parties represented in parliament (Republic of Cameroon. Office of the Prime Minister, 2020c). These measures included: wearing a mask in all spaces open to the public; local production of medicines, protective masks and hand sanitizers; establishment of specialized COVID-19 treatment centres in all regional capitals; intensification of screening campaigns; intensification of the awareness-raising campaigns in urban and rural areas in both official languages and local languages; continuation of activities essential to the economy in strict compliance with the directives of March 17, 2020; and sanctions for any breach of the restrictions and confinement imposed on persons at risk. Despite these public health measures, by April 15th the number of reported cases in the country had increased to 1009 with 21 recorded deaths and with cases reported in 6 of the country's 10 national regions (UNICEF 2020).

The proposed government response measures till then did not institute any form of national lockdown or travel restrictions from the hotspots to other regions of the country with no registered cases, nor propose interventions to alleviate the economic impact of the preventive measures on lives and livelihoods. Additionally, it did not address regulation and conduct of potential clinical trials for COVID-19 or the use of unproven medication (modern or traditional), although some guidelines on the management of COVID-19 patients through the establishment of specialized regional COVID-19 treatment centres had been proposed. It was against this backdrop that the Cameroon Bioethics Initiative (CAMBIN) issued a statement on COVID-19, primarily targeting the government and the general public (See Appendix 1). The statement was issued to complement the government response and draw the attention of the government to the importance of broadening the prevailing government's COVID-19 response strategy. The statement was circulated to a broad range of national and international stakeholders. CAMBIN is a non-profit, non-governmental, non-political, non-discriminatory, multidisciplinary association aiming at enabling the development of Bioethics in Cameroon, the central African sub-region and beyond with the main focus on capacity building and empowerment in health-related practices and research through ethics promotion.

The broader impact of the measures taken by the government of Cameroon to contain the spread of the disease is beginning to be felt now especially with reopening of bars and schools on the 14th of May and on the 1st of June, 2020 respectively. So far, Cameroon has registered over 17,255 infections, 387 deaths, and 15,320 recoveries as of August 01, 2020. This is having serious social and economic impact on the people, affecting small economies the most and unemployment rate is also rapidly rising (Kum and Kuoam, 2020). This abysmal situation, it is feared, may deteriorate further especially in areas where there is already a humanitarian crisis (UN OCHA 2020).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

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Appendix 1

Statement by the Cameroon Bioethics Initiative (CAMBIN) on the COVID-19 Pandemic (April, 15, 2020)

The Coronavirus disease19 (Covid-19) is spreading at an unprecedented pace across the globe, with more than 1,912,438 confirmed cases and 118,683 deaths across 209 countries and territories as of April 13, 2020.

CAMBIN (the Cameroon Bioethics Initiative) has as its fundamental purpose strengthening research capacity in Cameroon, the central African region and African continent at large, through promoting research ethics principles, ensuring protection of research participants, and providing training and education for students, researchers and members of research ethics committees /institutional review boards.

Currently there are no effective drugs or vaccines against Covid-19, and no rapid and affordable point of care diagnostics to test patients. However, there are claims about the effectiveness of certain existing medications for Covid-19 patient management. CAMBIN supports the compassionate use of such medications in the context of a physician-patient relationship, based on the professional judgement of the attending physician(s). CAMBIN equally recognizes the immediate need for mobilization of research activities within the framework of Covid-19 response efforts, in order to generate reliable data and the evidence base for guiding clinical practice and public health decision-making.

Although research may play a critical role in helping get a handle on the pandemic, research conducted within crises settings may pose particular ethical challenges. CAMBIN calls on national governments and national regulatory authorities to monitor and investigate any claims of efficacious treatments or biomedical interventions that are proposed during epidemic emergencies, and to help provide the framework for systematic evaluations of interventions in our local settings. Perhaps one of the most critical principles of bioethics to highlight at the moment is the principle of access to benefits; it is essential that any biomedical products evaluated within our settings that are proven effective must subsequently be made available to local populations. Governments should also begin planning how to promote domestic production of proven diagnostics, drugs, or vaccines as these new products become available.

One of the challenges of conducting research during health emergencies is the Time factor. Given enormous pressures to initiate studies, some institutions or researchers may be tempted to ‘cut corners’, to relax requirements for ethical review of protocols, and there may be those who may take advantage of patients in vulnerable circumstances. CAMBIN calls on governments, national regulatory authorities and other relevant institutions to be on high alert for unethical research studies and practices. CAMBIN is available and ready to contribute towards fighting this invisible enemy through issuing of relevant opinion statements and

reviewing research protocols, including clinical trials that may be conducted in Cameroon and/or in any other African country. We are committed to thorough, comprehensive, and rapid review of scientific study protocols, in order to maximize timeliness of research efforts.

CAMBIN endorses SHUTDOWN of non-essential public activities and other effective measures to reduce the spread of the infection, including stay at home orders and/or suspension of non-essential intra/inter-urban travels to and from epidemic hotspots. Such actions which restrain some individual liberties and freedoms should, however, be complemented with appropriate measures to cushion the socio-economic impact of the measures enforced, including access to basic goods and services.

We strongly advise people to listen and at least adhere strictly to the WHO guidelines on prevention and containment of the virus, and the national checklist derived from them as published by the relevant national

government Ministries/Departments.

CAMBIN strongly endorses local production, distribution and appropriate use of effective facemasks as long as the epidemic persists.

We look forward to working with the research community in this time of crisis, to overcome the enormous challenges through building solidarity, harnessing the power of science, and strengthening our structures of research ethics and governance.