

China's role in improving public health in Cameroon

By Manyanye Paul Ikome

YAOUNDE, Cameroon, April 30, 2016 (FOCAC) -- Forty years ago, Cameroon and China embarked on south-south cooperation. Since then, positive statistics have been recorded at Cameroon's Ministry of Public Health.

For instance, between 1965-2015, over one million Cameroonians have been treated by the Chinese and acupuncture successfully practiced on close to 250,000 people in the four major Chinese hospitals in Cameroon.

Moreover, 17,800 women have had safe deliveries and hundreds of thousands more successfully operated by Chinese medics for illnesses such as growths, fibroid, ectopic pregnancies, urinary tract infections, amongst others.

Talking to reporters about this form of cooperation with China, Cameroon's Minister for Public Health, Andre Mama Fouda remarked that; "Since 1975, close to 582 medical personnel from China amounting to 17 medical missions have been to Cameroon and dispatched to Chinese constructed hospitals in Mbalmayo, Yaounde and Guider."

Located 49km from Yaounde, the Mbalmayo District Hospital is the first health institution constructed by the Chinese in Cameroon. In an interview granted Cameroon Tribune, the Director of the hospital, Dr. Mickael Tsoungui Akoa, says; "We currently have 12 specialists from China. They are very competent and always available."

Dr. Wang Qing Yun, Gynaecologist of the 17th Chinese medical mission at the Mbalmayo District Hospital, reveals that; "Before coming to Cameroon, I read that many women died while giving birth in this part of the country. So, my mission here is to reduce this phenomenon."

For this reason, Mama Fouda is unequivocal on promoting this bilateral relation: "Health cooperation with China is fruitful and full of success stories. Most importantly, we are thrilled, because, this form of cooperation has led to the sharing of professional experiences between medical doctors from China and Cameroon. Some Cameroonian physicians are now able to skilfully practise acupuncture and other medical procedures which are deeply rooted in Chinese culture."

Gyneaco-Obstetric, Paediatrics Hospital

Another landmark achievement for Cameroon is the construction of a Gyneaco-Obstetric and Paediatrics Hospital in Yaounde. Since March 28, 2002, pregnant women living in Yaounde have greater chances of giving birth safely, following the inauguration of the hospital by the President of the Republic of Cameroon, Paul Biya. With a capacity to handle 240 patients, this facility caters for women and children.

"This hospital is the right address for family planning, antenatal consultations, child delivery, vaccination, paediatric surgery, obstetric surgery, infant cardiology, nutrition, radiology, acupuncture and every other illness related to children and women," says Yvonne Baha, a media practitioner who successfully gave birth in this facility six years ago, despite the complicated nature of her pregnancy.

One Peter Ewane observes; "If not for this hospital, my wife would have died while giving birth to our son in 2014."

Despite the succession of positive comments, disgruntled patients exist.

"With a minimum fee of FCFA 25,000 to be deposited by patients upon arrival, I think this hospital is closed to the poorest of the poor that make up a huge chunk of our society," says Felix Nunga, a Yaounde city dweller who expects more from the general cooperation between Cameroon and China.

To better serve Cameroonians, this hospital has partnered with international non-governmental organisations, such as; Smile Training and the Children Action Foundation, which are focused on facial and genital surgeries for children.

So far, the hospital has received 48 health practitioners, a modern city scan machine and material assistance estimated at over FCFA 4 billion from the People's Republic of China. During the commemoration of 40 years of medical cooperation between Cameroon and China, the Vice President of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in Shanxi Province, Professor Wei Xiaochun, offered anaesthetic drugs and reagents to this hospital for the conduct of blood count, biochemistry profiling of the kidney, liver, among others.

In 2006, the Chinese Government rehabilitated and equipped the Regional Hospital Annex in Buea to the tune of FCFA 1.8 billion.

In a bid to further reduce child mortality, Cameroon and China embarked on the construction of a second Gyneaco-Obstetric and Paediatric Hospital in Douala, to the tune of FCFA 10 billion.

"I am glad to announce to the population of Douala and all Cameroonians that the new Gyneaco-Obstetric and Paediatric Hospital is now operational," said Cameroon's Public Health Minister on August 28, 2015, during the mini inaugural of the 303-bed medical facility constructed on 7.4 hectares by the People's Republic of China.

On November 17, 2015, this facility was officially inaugurated by Cameroon's Prime Minister, Philemon Yang. During the ceremony, the Chinese Ambassador to Cameroon, HE Wei Wenhua, explained that; "The Chinese Government is concerned about the health and wellbeing of Cameroonians. The Gyneaco-Obstetric and Paediatric Hospital of Douala is another technological jewelry offered to the Republic of Cameroon by China after the one in Yaounde.

The Department of Cooperation at Cameroon's Ministry of Public Health discloses that the yearly donation of stocks of anti-malaria medication by China to Cameroon since 2006 stands at over FCFA 500 million. There is also a Malaria Research Centre at the Yaounde Gyneaco-Obstetric and Paediatric Hospital which went operational in 2009.

From this centre, policies are formulated on how to best fight the malaria parasite in Cameroon. The awarding of scholarships to medical personnel for in-service training in China since 1985

also sets the stage for the copying of best medical practices in China.

Beyond what we see

Dr. Christopher Nsoh of the Centre for Research on Political and Strategic Studies at the University of Yaounde II opines that; “China has actively participated in improving the health sector in Cameroon from various angles and I think this is very positive.

Furthermore, China has broken the monopoly which was championed by Western pharmaceutical firms. The prices of most drugs are on a steady decline today because of serious competition from China.”

In order to maximise cooperation with the People's Republic of China, the scholar posits that “Cameroonians should be sent to China to study and acquire their technological skills. We should not allow the Chinese to exclusively do everything for us.”

Even though medical cooperation between the two countries is largely heartening, there are a few cracks which must be mended. For instance, during the construction of Chinese hospitals and other infrastructure in Cameroon, the man-power generally came from China, excluding Cameroonian technicians and engineers. Dr. Nsoh advises; “We need a clear regulatory policy to define what our cooperation with China should look like.”

Meantime, China's heightened involvement in Cameroon's Public Health sector echoes Section 5.5 of the 2013-2015 Action Plan of the Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation adopted on July 23, 2012, which focuses on Medical Care and Public Health in Africa.

Both parties agreed to deploy more Chinese medical teams to Africa as well as continuing the training of African doctors, nurses and administrative personnel in China. They also agreed to strengthen cooperation in the prevention, treatment and control of HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and other major communicable diseases, maternal/child health and public health policies.

China is presently conducting the “Brightness Action” campaign in Africa to provide free treatment for cataract. In Cameroon, this Action Plan was put in motion from January 12-15, 2013 during the official visit to Cameroon of the Chinese Minister for Public Health, Dr. Chen Zhu.

From the resolutions arrived at during the recent Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC 2015), which took place in South Africa, China will even do more in Cameroon in the years ahead.

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He has a Master's Degree in Public Relations and another in Strategy, Security, Defense, Disaster and Conflict Resolution from the University of Yaounde II. He is a researcher on ongoing relations between China and Africa. He currently serves as Communication and Public Relations Manager at the Cameroon Development Corporation, CDC, where he informs over 22,000 workers on the activities of his employer.

This article was produced by Manyanye Paul Ikome, a journalist from Cameroon who participated in the China-Africa Reporting Project's 2015 FOCAC Themed Grants series, and was first published on Cameroon Web. - See more at:
<http://china-africa-reporting.co.za/2016/04/chinas-role-in-improving-public-health-in-cameroon/#sthash.guEep5Bl.dpuf>