

## FROM EVIDENCE TO IMPACT: IMPROVING NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES CARE THROUGH IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH

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Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are now the leading cause of morbidity and mortality globally, with low- and middle-income countries LMICs bearing a disproportionate burden. There are 38 million deaths annually attributable to NCDs, accounting for 68% of all deaths worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Cardiovascular diseases, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases, diabetes mellitus and other groups of NCDs increasingly coexist with infectious disease challenges, straining an already fragile health system.<sup>2,3</sup> Despite decades of epidemiological and clinical research identifying effective prevention and treatment strategies, population-level outcomes remain suboptimal.<sup>4</sup> This gap between evidence and practice underscores the urgent need to rethink NCD care through implementation research, which examines how proven interventions can be delivered effectively in real-world settings.<sup>5</sup>

Most NCD research in Nigeria has focused on epidemiology, defining prevalence, risk factors, and disease trends. While valuable for policy planning, these insights rarely translate into improved outcomes without practical delivery strategies. The next frontier is shifting from epidemiology to home- and community-based clinical trials, where interventions are evaluated under real-life conditions. Such approaches are critical in settings where facility access is limited, follow-up is inconsistent, and medication cost and availability constrain treatment.<sup>6</sup>

A major barrier to effective NCD care is poor access to essential medicines. In hypertension and diabetes mellitus, drug affordability has reached crisis levels; the Diabetes Association of Nigeria has recently called for a state of emergency in diabetes care<sup>7</sup>. High out-of-pocket expenditure undermines treatment adherence and ultimately leads to preventable complications, which are then captured by conventional research only when patients present to tertiary hospitals.<sup>8</sup> Implementation research offers an opportunity to identify context-specific strategies to improve medicine availability, affordability, and long-term adherence.

In Nigeria, the government has made attempts to ensure that such challenges are being addressed. This has been seen in policies such as the enactment of the National Non-communicable Disease Policy, which expanded health insurance for catastrophic diseases, provided public funding to subsidize cost of dialysis for patients in need, and provision of regional

oncology centres, amongst others.<sup>9</sup> These interventions are evidence-based and were driven by advocacy and recognition of the scale of the problem. Other NCDs would similarly benefit from targeted policies if researchers adopt an implementation science perspective, ensuring that robust evidence is effectively translated into routine practice.

Equity considerations are central. Interventions effective in tertiary centres may fail in rural communities. Home-based trials and implementation research explicitly account for contextual differences, including medication availability and cost, to ensure interventions reach those most in need. Postgraduate medical training should incorporate implementation science, equipping future clinicians with the skills to translate evidence into practical, scalable solutions.

**Call to Action:** Researchers should prioritise implementation research, home- and community-based trials, and bench-to-bedside collaborations to ensure scientific advances inform practical interventions. Coordinated action across government, health systems, and research institutions is essential to achieve equitable, sustainable improvements in NCD outcomes.

In conclusion, bridging the gap between evidence and practice is critical to curbing Nigeria's NCD burden. Implementation research approaches provide the tools to ensure that proven interventions translate into tangible health impact. By building on existing government initiatives and responding to urgent calls for action, Nigeria can move from knowledge to impact, ensuring that evidence saves lives.

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