

TRANSCRIPT

## **HIE PODCAST 6: Conrad Tankou and GICMED**

**BH:** Hi, I'm Bruno Holthof, and you're listening to Health Innovation and Entrepreneurship, a podcast series from the International Health and Tropical Medicine Programme at the University of Oxford.

Our guest today is Conrad Tankou. Conrad is a medical doctor and entrepreneur from Cameroon who passionately believes that technology solutions tailored to the African context can help solve many of the continent's health challenges.

After graduating as a doctor, he worked in rural settings in Cameroon, and he has witnessed first-hand how difficult it is for people in these rural areas to access basic healthcare services. After serving as a frontline doctor, Conrad became a Hospital Director and he has experienced the challenges of working with various other organizations in the health system to deliver health care services.

This inspired him to start a health tech venture that designs and promotes cutting-edge and cost-effective solutions for health challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa. GICMED, the flagship project, offers a combination of hardware and software solutions targeting cervical cancer, the most common cancer of women in sub-Saharan Africa.

The cervical cancer burden is particularly high in rural areas, and GICMED wants to target women in these settings. The challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa involve a lack of enough medical specialists to screen for cervical cancer and a lack of the required medical equipment.

GICMED has developed a smart speculum device. It integrates the concept of a speculum and a colposcope into a single portable device, which can be easily manipulated by a frontline nurse powered by a smart device. And the GICMED solution enables medical experts to receive and review data for remote diagnosis.

The device is designed to work in rural areas that don't have reliable electricity supply or internet connectivity.

Conrad received the Africa Young Innovators for Africa Award in 2021. And his company GICSpace graduated from the Creative Destruction Lab organized by the Saïd Business School of the University of Oxford in 2023.

This promises to be a great discussion with Conrad.

Hey, Conrad, welcome to the program. Let me start by asking you, what's your vision for GICMED and what impact do you hope to achieve in the next 10 years?

**GUESTSPEAKER-CT:** Our dream actually is to be able to enable the screening rate of women in these areas, particularly to move from currently about 5% demonstrated in studies to up to about 60% in the next 10 years. And through this, we are hoping to be able to detect cancer cases early and treat it early as well, so that the disease burden linked to cervical cancer in

terms of high rates of advanced disease as well as high death rates can be significantly reduced especially in these settings but also we are hoping to be able to empower the frontline nurses in this type of areas to be able to provide constant access for women in their catchment areas to cervical cancer care, and also in the long run, being able to gather adequate data that can drive policy to be able to define guidelines to provide a more universal access to cancer care for women in developing countries in general.

**BH:** Great, Conrad. That is really a nice vision. Could you elaborate a bit on who you're thinking will be able to pay for your screening services? Will that be the women themselves or will you have reimbursement from government or payers?

**GUESTSPEAKER-CT:** That's actually a very challenging question, Bruno, because currently healthcare affordability is almost entirely out of pocket cost, right, with limited availability of private health insurance schemes. And universal health coverage is not still a reality at this point.

We are brainstorming a lot on a lot of possibilities in terms of affordability. And we are also thinking a lot on third-party financing schemes where we can be able to demonstrate that a cost-effective technology being implemented at the point of care can be implemented at a cheaper rate.

And in such a system, we can have different financing systems where third parties can be able to cover the cost of women accessing these services in rural areas particularly, but also a cross-system where those who can afford the solution in urban areas particularly can some sort of subsidize the cost of accessing these services for those in the rural areas who have a low purchasing power.

So, we are thinking of a diverse set of financing models.

**BH:** Wonderful. I mean, I can only imagine how difficult it is to be an entrepreneur in Cameroon and Sub-Saharan Africa. If you would start over again, Conrad, are there things that you would do differently?

**GUESTSPEAKER-CT:** Definitely, Bruno. I'll say through GICMED and developing the smart speculum particularly, it was really our first attempt to venture into the medical device space. And I'll say we learned the hard way, right? Because at the start, I think we did a lot of brainstorming and understanding the problem and trying to craft the best technology-oriented solution to target this problem. But there are other aspects of the ecosystem which we didn't really dig deep into to understand. And there are some realities about trying to develop such a solution in Africa. For example, there is no basic manufacturing infrastructure that you can leverage upon to build such a solution.

And secondly, the great problem of regulation, right, where there are no guidelines in place in countries like Cameroon, for example, but spanning through other sub-Saharan African countries, which can really permit technologies like this to be developed and brought to market very rapidly.

So, a lot of brainstorming. If I had to do this again, of course, it might seem we're going to do a lot of brainstorming, if I had to do this again, of course, it might seem we're going to do a lot of brainstorming to try to understand all the key aspects of the ecosystem, which we need, and start engaging with them as early as possible as well while we're developing our technology. And particularly the case of regulation, it's also an important aspect, which we learned, noting that in the African context where the regulatory landscape changes moving from one country to the other it's very important to try to start understanding these things at the start while brainstorming or developing the project as well and also trying to get engaged with the regulatory authorities as early as possible because the reality of the context as well is that there is some sort of intergenerational gap where most of the innovators are young people. Talking about technology development as well, that's something of the young people, but the policymakers are the older people. And it takes a lot of time to be able to explain these innovations to the older generation. So, engaging with them early enough can be a step to try to bridge this gap and some sort of fast track in an environment where regulation is still a problem. They're trying to move or bring to market in a very fast pace possible technologies which can potentially bring a lot of impact, especially to the poorest settings.

**BH:** Yeah, indeed, Conrad. And at this stage, do you now have regulatory approval or are you still discussing with the authorities what is required to achieve that approval?

**GUESTSPEAKER-CT:** We are still in discussions with the regulatory authorities, but also apart from regulation, clinical approvals for clinical trials as well is a problem. And just because most of the guidelines have been copy pasted from the developing settings and don't really adapt to the local settings. And this is part of our fight in such a way that we are trying to engage with these authorities in such a way that we can have guidelines as well that are adapted to our context.

And also, we are pioneering these and we are hoping that after this stage, we are able to pave the pathway for other innovators to be able to bring our products and fast track them to the market faster because we have guidelines or regulations in place which adapt more to our local context.

**BH:** This is really amazing, Conrad. You're breaking new ground as a young innovator in Cameroon. And as you know, we are teaching the future leaders in global health here in Oxford. So, my last question to you, what advice would you give to our students in Oxford?

**GUESTSPEAKER-CT:** Great. So, the first advice I'll give is that, of course, there are still a lot of health challenges in the developing world, and that's really an opportunity. On the other side, we see a lot of progress in terms of technology. And I think that's where these young global leaders have as a task to be able to be at a crossroad of bringing evidence to validate that these new technologies particularly can be able to adapt to the right implementation strategies, the right policies to be able to enable innovations, adapt to local context, developing context, particularly, especially considering socio-cultural context, and be able to put in place mechanisms that will build a monitoring and evaluation plan that will strengthen the technologies, particularly to create more impact as time goes on. It's going to be a learning

process, of course. And another reality is that failure is something which is inevitable. So, it's actually trying to be brave enough, accepting failure and always keep learning.

**BH:** What a story, Conrad, a real inspiration for young entrepreneurs. And I want to thank you for joining this podcast series. If you also like this podcast and you want to listen to other entrepreneurs in health, don't forget to subscribe to this podcast series. And if you're interested in reading more about the work we're doing in international health and tropical medicine, please click on the link provided below this podcast. Thank you for listening. Thank you, Conrad, and see you soon.

**GUESTSPEAKER-CT:** Thank you, Bruno.

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