Editorial

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Headache burden among schoolchildren in Sub-Saharan Africa on the map for targeted solutions

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The recent work by Magnerou et al. (1) provides valuable insight about the prevalence and burden of headache, migraine and tension-type headache (TTH) among children in Sub-Saharan Africa. The study reports that students aged 8–12 years in Douala, Cameroon, experienced at least one headache episode within the past year in 85.7% of the studied sample. Of those, 26.1% were migraines and 15.1% were tension-type headache. Almost one-third of children with migraines reported missing school because of their headaches, and nearly one-half experienced impaired school performance (2,3). The study highlights a significant yet underrecognized health issue in Sub-Saharan Africa. The high prevalence of primary headaches among schoolchildren and the associated impact on their lives call for immediate public health action (2).

The Global Burden of Disease 2021 study (4) further emphasized the severity of this issue, showing that headache disorders are among the top causes of years lived with disability across all age groups, but with more significant impacts on children and adolescents. Migraine is the leading cause of disability among neurological disorders in those aged 5–19 years. The findings in this article suggest that a much greater attention must be given to childhood headaches because their toll on those affected may have lasting consequences that extend far beyond their childhood (5,6).

One major limitation of the study is its focus on an urban population in Douala, which may not be representative of rural areas or other regions within Sub-Saharan Africa. The urban setting can introduce certain biases, such as differences in healthcare access, environmental factors and socioeconomic conditions that are not present in rural areas. Additionally, the study may have missed variations in headache prevalence and impact as a result of cultural or regional differences. The generalizability of the findings is therefore limited and caution should be taken when applying these results to a broader population. Future studies should aim to include a more diverse sample to better understand the headache burden across different settings within the region (7,8).

Incorporating headache management strategies into school health programs and curricula, such as the School Health Programs and WASH Programs, could help mitigate the adverse effects on children's education and overall well-being. Moreover, initiatives like the World Food Program (WFP) and UNICEF's nutrition programs, which address malnutrition and support overall child health, can indirectly influence the prevalence and severity of headache disorders. Malnutrition and poor health conditions are known to exacerbate headache conditions. Mental health and psychosocial support initiatives by organizations may also affect headache outcomes, but we should not be limited to the obvious. There is a need for a targeted, special populational management plan focused on headache disorders (9,10).

Future research should aim to expand the geographic scope to include rural areas and other countries within the region. It is also crucial to investigate the underlying causes and risk factors associated with headache disorders in African children, including genetic predispositions, lifestyle factors and the role of environmental stressors. Longitudinal studies would be valuable to assess the long-term impact of these conditions on academic achievement and social development. The treatment cascade, detailing the number of undiagnosed, undertreated and uncontrolled headaches, should be examined. This is crucial because "if we cannot measure it, we cannot fix it" (8,11).

The headache burden among schoolchildren in Sub-Saharan Africa is now on the map for targeted solutions. Recognizing and addressing this burden requires specific actions from public health officials, educators and policymakers to develop and implement targeted interventions. This will not only improve the health and well-being of these children, but also enhance their academic and social outcomes, ultimately contributing to the broader goal of sustainable development in the region.

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