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CHAMPS

NIGERIA – CROSS RIVER Newsletter

Highlights in this Issue:

Understanding MITS: Innovation in Postmortem Investigation
Pregnancy surveillance training initiatives

Understanding Child Mortality Through Surveillance

Advocacy and Engagement Activities



CROSS RIVER STATE
MINISTRY OF
HEALTH



FEDERAL MINISTRY OF
HEALTH



Message from the Site Director

Welcome to the inaugural edition of the CHAMPS Nigeria – Cross River Newsletter. This platform provides an opportunity to share our progress, celebrate the contributions of our partners, and spotlight the dedication of teams working across all CHAMPS workstreams.

As part of a global health surveillance network, CHAMPS Nigeria – Cross River is uniquely positioned to translate data into meaningful action. Through deep-rooted community engagement, improved reporting systems and cutting-edge diagnostics and minimally invasive tissue sampling (MITS), we are building a stronger foundation for child health in Cross River State.

Each data point we collect reflects not just a number, but a story—a child, a family, and a future we can help protect. This issue features stories from two of our frontline workstreams – Mortality Surveillance and MITS/Pathology – and sets the stage for highlighting more of our specialized teams in the issues to come. I hope this newsletter gives you insight into the transformative work being done, and inspires all of us to continue advocating for the most vulnerable among us.

— Professor M. Meremikwu

“Each data point we collect reflects not just a number, but a story—a child, a family, and a future we can help protect.”

WHAT IS CHAMPS?

Child Health and Mortality Prevention Surveillance (CHAMPS) is a global surveillance network that works to save children's lives by generating, collecting, analyzing and sharing accurate, timely data about the causes of child mortality in regions where it is highest. Our open-access data sharing, and diverse, multi- sectoral partnerships drive evidence-based interventions to reduce child mortality. The CHAMPS global health network currently has sites in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Pakistan and Nigeria. To learn more about CHAMPS and use our data, visit CHAMPShealth.org.



CHAMPS GLOBAL MISSION

- Vision: A world where all preventable child deaths are eliminated through accurate data and responsive action.
- Mission: To identify, understand, and share precise causes of child mortality and use that knowledge to save lives.
- Network: Active in sites across Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia

CHAMPS NIGERIA – CROSS RIVER AT A GLANCE

- Operational since July 2023
- Covers 7 LGAs in Southern Cross River State
- Activities include Community Engagement, SBS, HDSS, Pregnancy Surveillance, Mortality Surveillance, MITS, Lab, Informatics and Data-to-Action
- Based at the University of Calabar and the Teaching Hospital



Meet the CHAMPS Workstreams

OVERVIEW OF CHAMPS NIGERIA – CROSS RIVER WORKSTREAMS

CHAMPS Nigeria – Cross River's work is organized into specialized workstreams, each contributing a unique role in achieving the program's goal of reducing child mortality through data, research, and action.

*This issue features in-depth stories from the MITS/Pathology and Mortality Surveillance workstreams.
See Pages 4 and 5 for more*

MITS/PATHOLOGY WORK- STREAM



Performs Minimally Invasive Tissue Sampling to identify biological causes of child deaths. This team supports postmortem diagnostics in collaboration with pathology and lab staff.

LABORATORY WORKSTREAM



Processes samples collected through CHAMPS procedures. Supports infrastructure improvements including equipment setup and specimen tracking.

PREGNANCY SURVEILLANCE WORKSTREAM



Monitors maternal and newborn health outcomes, training health workers and supporting timely reporting through pregnancy surveillance activities across all 7 LGAs.

INFORMATICS & ETHICS WORKSTREAM



Oversees data systems, privacy protections, and ethical compliance for all CHAMPS surveillance and research activities.

HDSS WORKSTREAM



Implements Health and Demographic Surveillance System to track individuals, households, births, and deaths. Over 104,810 individuals enrolled across 24,500 households.

DATA TO ACTION WORKSTREAM



Transforms CHAMPS findings into reports, briefs, and strategic actions to inform health policies and interventions.

MORTALITY SURVEILLANCE WORKSTREAM



Identifies and reports deaths of children under five and pregnant women to support MITS procedures and data reporting.

SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE WORKSTREAM



Supports community-centered implementation of CHAMPS activities. This includes conducting focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and PICK-CHAMP workshops to explore cultural beliefs, understand barriers to participation, and promote awareness of child mortality prevention efforts.

Understanding MITS: Innovation in Postmortem Investigation

The CHAMPS Nigeria – Cross River pathology team employs Minimally Invasive Tissue Sampling (MITS) as a modern, respectful alternative to conventional autopsies to determine the cause of child deaths. MITS is a structured sampling technique involving the collection of body fluids and small, core tissue biopsies using biopsy needles. Unlike complete autopsies, MITS is better accepted within communities due to its less intrusive nature.

The CHAMPS Nigeria – Cross River team successfully established local MITS capacity at the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital (UCTH). This achievement followed intensive hands-on training in Maputo, Mozambique, and was complemented by follow-up technical support during training sessions in Lagos and Bauchi. Today, the team is independently conducting MITS procedures that meet CHAMPS global standards.

Each procedure is performed by a skilled, multidisciplinary team including a pathologist, mortician, microbiologist, laboratory technician, and data recorder. The team operates within a structured protocol that includes pre-procedure documentation, targeted sampling of organs (lungs, brain, liver, heart, etc.), preservation in formalin, postmortem blood and CSF collection, and complete documentation and photography.

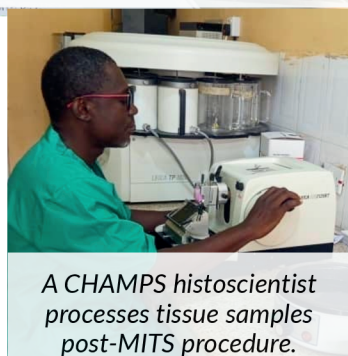
Following sample collection, laboratory testing is carried out to detect pathogens, signs of inflammation, and other vital markers. The team is also trained to perform verbal autopsies and collaborate closely with surveillance officers to validate findings.



CHAMPS MITS team prepares for a procedure inside the MITS Room



Digital equipment enabling remote pathology consultations and diagnosis.



A CHAMPS histoscientist processes tissue samples post-MITS procedure.



CHAMPS pathologists perform a MITS procedure at the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital (UCTH).

“Through our diagnostic work, we bring clarity to tragedy so that every child’s story contributes to preventing the next.”

— Dr. Theophilus I. Ugbem

The integration of MITS into CHAMPS Nigeria – Cross River’s routine operations marks a significant advancement in local diagnostic capacity. Through this work, we are not only honoring every child who passes, but also extracting life-saving information to guide public health decisions.



Contributed by Dr. Theophilus I. Ugbem
BSc (H.Anat), MBBCh, FMCPATH
MITS/Pathology Workstream Lead,
CHAMPS-CR

Understanding Child Mortality Through Surveillance



The site conducted the pre-enrolment trainings on the mortality surveillance SOPs for doctors, nurses and other health workers in Calabar between March and May 2024. Initial training on bereavement and grief counselling as well as consenting conducted in June 2024).

IMPACT SNAPSHOT

- 24-hour case validation and assignment system
- Community-wide notification channels via phone calls, in-person visits, and ward-level informants
- Referrals to MITS team for further diagnostic investigation

The Mortality Surveillance Workstream is a cornerstone of CHAMPS Nigeria – Cross River’s mission to uncover the real causes behind child deaths in our communities. Operating across all 7 LGAs of Cross River State, the team plays a critical role in identifying deaths, initiating the verbal autopsy process, and ensuring that vital data reaches the CHAMPS network in real time. The team’s work begins with daily engagement with community informants, health facilities, religious leaders, and community leaders to identify deaths of children under five and stillbirths. Once a death is identified, the team follows up within 24 hours to validate the case, MITS is conducted and then it is assigned to a trained staff member who will conduct a verbal autopsy interview with the caregiver.

The goal is to understand what happened in the final days and hours before the child died – information that’s often missing from formal health records. The process also involves the use of the Death Management Form (DMF) to collect consistent data and track referrals for MITS procedures where applicable. Surveillance officers work alongside MITS teams, the HDSS platform, and the data team to build a robust, coordinated death investigation system. Thanks to the efforts of the mortality surveillance team, CHAMPS Nigeria – Cross River is ensuring that no child death goes unrecorded – and no cause remains unknown.

“Through our diagnostic work, we bring clarity to tragedy so that every child’s story contributes to preventing the next.”

Contributed by the CHAMPS Nigeria – Cross River Mortality Surveillance Team Lead

Advocacy and Engagement Activities

As part of its broad and ongoing community engagement efforts, CHAMPS NIGERIA – CROSS RIVER regularly engages diverse community groups, health workers, and key stakeholders across traditional, religious, and government structures.

While activities such as grief counselling and community-based trainings continue at the grassroots level, targeted advocacy visits play a vital role in strengthening institutional partnerships and aligning CHAMPS activities with local priorities.

Some of the advocacy visits included meetings with:

- The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) leadership (Name Placeholder)
- The Paramount Ruler of Calabar South LGA (Name Placeholder)

These visits have helped reinforce trust, promote program ownership, and ensure the integration of CHAMPS priorities within community leadership structures.



CHAMPS team meets with leadership of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Cross River State chapter, as part of its strategic advocacy to build trust and community support.



Advocacy visit to the Paramount Ruler of Calabar South LGA — strengthening traditional leadership support for child mortality surveillance and collaboration.

INAUGURATION OF THE CHAMPS NIGERIA-CR COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARDS

The CHAMPS Community Advisory Board (CAB) members are leaders and representatives of communities in the CHAMPS catchment area who ensure that the work of CHAMPS serves the best interests of the communities they represent as required by the Nigerian National Code of Research Ethics



Partner Spotlight

- State Ministry of Health – Policy and coordination support
- National Population Commission – Demographic collaboration
- Community Leaders – Advocacy and local mobilization
- Health Facility Staff – Training and service integration
- Ward Development Committees (WDCs) – Surveillance and community coordination

CHAMPS Global Collaboration

CHAMPS Nigeria – Cross River actively benefits from global network collaborations, notably through training received in Maputo, Mozambique, enhancing local capacity.

We recently welcomed a technical team from CHAMPS headquarters to Calabar, including specialists from pathology, HDSS, informatics, and community engagement. Their visit provided an opportunity to assess progress, troubleshoot implementation challenges, and offer site-level coaching to strengthen alignment with global standards. The team also conducted walkthroughs of the MITS site and HistoLab, held review sessions with local leads, and provided strategic insights to guide future work. This collaboration further reinforced the integration of CHAMPS Nigeria – Cross River into the broader global surveillance network.



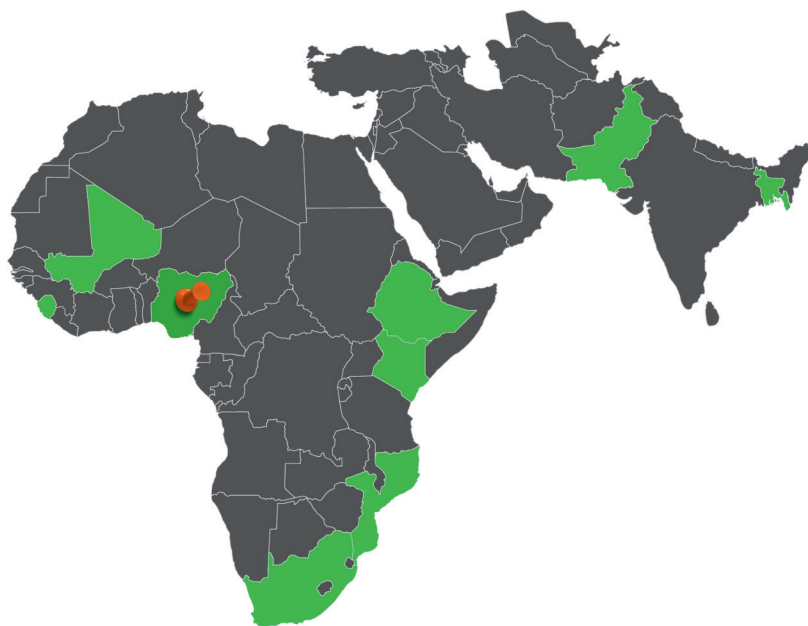
Member of CHAMPS Nigeria - Cross River team in Calabar with Kristin LaHatte and Navit Salzberg visiting from CHAMP Program Office at Emory University Atlanta USA



CHAMPS NIGERIA – CROSS RIVER pathology team during hands-on MITS training at the CHAMPS central site in Maputo, Mozambique.

CHAMPS SURVEILLANCE NETWORK SITES

- Bangladesh
- Ethiopia
- Kenya
- Mali
- Mozambique
- **Nigeria**
- Sierra Leone
- South Africa
- Pakistan



THE CHAMPS NIGERIA TEAM

The CHAMPS NIGERIA teams in Cross River and Bauchi continue to lead the way in strengthening child mortality surveillance across the country.

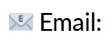


CHAMPS NIGERIA colleagues from the Bauchi catchment area and program office join the Cross River team for a collaborative site visit.



MORE INFORMATION

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