
Socialist Cuba Exports Health Care, Gains Important Recognition

28/07/2014



In Cuba recently press conferences and new reports celebrated the ten-year anniversary of Operation Miracle, known also as “Misión Miracle,” which occurred on July 8. This internationalized project aimed at restoring vision on a massive scale took shape within the context of ALBA, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America.

Cuba and Venezuela launched ALBA in late 2004. Latin American and Caribbean nations belonging to ALBA engage in mutually beneficial trade-offs of educational and medical services, scientific projects, even commodities. They are referred to as solidarity exchanges. ALBA exemplifies Cuba and Venezuela’s central role in promoting regional integration.

Under Operation Miracle, Cubans and Venezuelans benefit from surgical eye care, as do tens of thousands of foreign nationals who’ve traveled to Cuba for treatment. Cuban ophthalmologists serving in Venezuela took the lead in establishing 26 eye care centers throughout that national territory. Staff consisting of eye surgeons, nurses, technicians, and other physicians have served Venezuelans and also vision- impaired people from 17 Latin American countries plus Italy, Portugal, and Puerto Rico. More recently organizers established centers in 14 Latin American and Caribbean nations. Ten years after its start the project operates in 31 countries, some in Africa and Asia.

Those receiving diagnosis and treatment through Operation Miracle had gone without eye care because of poverty and/or geographic inaccessibility. The most common cause of reduced vision the teams deal with is cataract. They provide treatment also for glaucoma, strabismus, retina problems, and abnormal ocular growths. Corrective lenses are provided. Services are available for patients at no personal cost, as are transportation and accommodations.

Operation Miracle reportedly has improved or restored vision for 3.4 million individuals. That measure of the project’s reach takes on additional meaning through World Health Organization data showing that 39 million people in the world are blind. These figures are within reach of one another, especially because most visual impairment – 80 percent – is preventable or curable.

So it seems that two formerly colonized, dependent nations have taken giant steps toward addressing a major cause of human disability. But who, one asks, knows this story of human betterment? Writing recently for Cuba's La Pupila Insomne web site, journalist Jose Manzaneda charges that international media ignored this "spectacular news."

He highlights the Spanish El Pais newspaper as a purveyor of anti-Cuban bias. Recently El Pais writer Mauricio Vivent reported on international assistance to Haiti, but failed to mention Cuban efforts to fill Haiti's health-care vacuum. In fact, according to Manzaneda, 11,000 Cuban health workers, mostly physicians, have served in Haiti for more than 16 year, and 700 of them are there now. They've cared for 20 million patients, performed 373,000 surgical operations, and delivered 150,000 babies. Over 1300 Haitian young people, recipients of Cuban government scholarships, have graduated from Cuban universities. Currently 322 Haitians are studying medicine in Cuba.

Why the reticence on the part of the world's dominant media? Historian Aviva Chomsky speculated in 2000 that Cuba is suspect because of its "threat of a good example." She was writing about Cuban health care achievements.

The recent visit to Cuba of Dr. Margaret Chan, Director – General of the World Health Organization, elevated that threat to high alert. On July 16, while participating in the inauguration of a new structure in Havana that will house a center for bio-pharmaceutical development and another for clinical trials, she observed that Cuba "is the only country I have visited with a [health] system tightly connected with research and development in a closed circle ... The objective of science is to serve health care and health and in this, Cuba is an example." Chan lauded "the Cuban purpose of benefiting not only the health of Cubans but also of the citizens of Latin America and the rest of the world."

Writing in the new guest book, Chan congratulated one center "for its great achievements over 25 years. This has been possible through the vision of leaders like Fidel and Raul Castro who think strategically, for the long term, and established the bases for the success we see today. I congratulate them for their contribution to the improvement of the health of people in Cuba, in the region, and in the world. The Pan American Health Organization and the World Health organization will always be your good and trustworthy friends."

In a 2008 letter explaining his decision no longer to serve as Cuba's president, Fidel Castro stated that, "My only wish is to fight as a soldier in the battle of ideas." Indeed, medical outreach to Haiti, Operation Miracle, ALBA, and the centers that Dr. Chan praised are themselves ideas that Cuba has advanced, in struggle. The overarching idea, however, is "Patria es Humanidad" (homeland is humanity) which was pronounced by Cuban national hero Jose Marti. Surely, as demonstrated by down –to- earth, people – centered instances of international solidarity, Cuba's revolution remains true to its Martian roots.