"Slave" for the Well-being and Health of People

By: Xenia Balón de la Cuesta
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For Dr. Adrián Ramón Benítez Proenza, first degree specialist in Hygiene and Epidemiology, solidarity is natural. Since he chose Medicine as a profession, enduring adversity and supporting all those in disadvantaged situations -even if it implies his greatest sacrifice-, have been premises in his daily job.

This is demonstrated by his participation in the fight against Ebola in Liberia in 2014, the support to the Fiji Islands after the devastating effects of Hurricane Winston in 2016 and the assistance to nearly 20 thousand victims of the floods caused by the climate event. “Niño Costero” in Peru, in 2017.

In Ecuador, Benítez Proenza had the opportunity to exchange experiences with other collaborators and to strengthen ties with his patients, to the point of considering them as family, a relationship that was cut short in 2019, due to the announcement of the government of that nation to end the medical collaboration between both countries. Later, in 2020, he too travelled to Turin, Italy, in the fight against COVID19.

On his professional growth and as a human being, in each of these experiences, and his dedication to keep the health and well-being of his patients, said Adrián Benítez Proenza.

In his years as a Doctor, what have been the differences you’ve witnessed between the Cuban health system and private medicine?

I have had the chance of travelling to distant places worldwide; When I say this I mean countries of the capitalist social system and not like ours. I have seen many things that sadden the human soul: misery, hunger or poor access to health services ...

Cuba, on the contrary, shows a health system recognized worldwide and we have been able to take it to other regions with the purpose of helping. Above all, Cuba stands out for its accessibility to health services. Any Cuban, no matter how distant he may live, can have the essential services to stay alive and assistance in the first four golden minutes, as established in public health. This is an unparalleled aspect.

Another issue is that the service is offered free of charge: personalized care to pregnant women, nursing children, and anyone with a chronic disease; the total delivery of drugs, in other countries don't even know the demographic amount of their population... These characteristics set guidelines for other social systems.

Sometimes the truth about Cuba is distorted by some international media, in this scenario, how is the welcoming like of the inhabitants in other regions, how do you win their trust and create empathy between the doctor and the patient?

This question touches my soul, because I have experienced it firsthand. We have reached places where, at times, we haven't had the slightest acceptance. I have worked with indigenous communities in Ecuador and, at the beginning, they spoke in a typical dialect of the region so that I could not understand them, but with the help of translators, our level of humanism, our knowledge, we became closer.

In developed countries like Italy, we had to prove our worth as professionals. Upon arriving in Turin, a city hospital chief had the patience to interview each of us to find out our professional level. Then he entered the red zone with us, to see how we received the patient, took him to his bed, followed him up and admitted him. When he saw that we followed all the protocol, then he gave us full access to work.

The greatest gratitude in Turin was when authorities gave us the recognitions and, more than that, it was the gratitude of patients. There were hundreds of letters that read "you are indeed doctors, you are our guardian angels, you do get to us." They had never felt that Italian paramedics touched them the way we examined them, from head to toe, despite having such an infectious-contagious disease, and they appreciated that very much. These acknowledgments were reflected by the Italian press on television.

Part of the international press said that Cuban doctors are treated by the Cuban government as "slaves" and this was one of the main premises for ending contracts in countries like Brazil, Ecuador, and Bolivia. How do you remember the moment when you had to abandon your patients?

Honestly, it was more painful for them to lose our medical care than for me to return to my country. I returned to my country, my place of origin, my family from which I am distant to be able to help them. What the government of those countries does not recognize is that Cuban doctors are capable of doing: what their professionals don't do, those doctors support an economic medicine, profit, and luxury.

When Cuban doctors left here, we signed an agreement and it's logical that we must abide this agreement. It's as if I told you that I'm going to visit your house today and I didn't, hence I am not keeping my word as a professional. Nor would I do what some of our collaborators do, who after deserting the mission began to insult our country.

I don't feel like an exploited doctor, but rather full that I have been able to grow in the field of Medicine. I am satisfied, not entirely, because I always want more. I feel I have a duty towards humanity and not towards myself. If you follow the advice of Aesculapius, considered in Greek mythology the god of medicine and healing, you know that the doctor owes himself to others. He is capable of sacrificing himself so that others obtain welfare, which is health: the most fundamental good a human being can have.

COVID19 seriously shook neoliberal dogmas and we have witnessed health structures collapse in great power countries. How do you value Cuba's effort in tackling the pandemic on the island and internationally?

I am sure this is one of the great things our country has done. Under the doctrine of Commander Fidel Castro, a more humanistic, supportive, altruistic and internationalist medicine was born. If we take a look in history, we have previously had many examples of internationalism towards our country.

Cuba proves, day after day, that despite not being a world economic power, it's an international medical power. We don't have all the economic development regarding equipment, but we do have the knowledge and we have proven it in developed countries. In those nations medical equipment is hyper sophisticated, top of the line, and within a week our collaborators mastered how to use all of them, the protocol with the patients and even wrote in

many of the clinical charts in Italian.

I believe that the greatest example that can be given to humanity is that our country - not only for its people, but for the rest of the world - thinks first on the man, on the human being, and not on the wealth it may gain.

Translated by Amilkal Labañino / CubaSí Translation Staff.