UN Health Assembly Elevates Cuba to Presidency

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The World Health Organization (WHO), an agency of the United Nations, has named a new president for its decision-making body, the World Health Assembly (WHA): Cuba's minister of public health, Roberto Morales Ojeda — the man who oversees a socialist healthcare system in which the average Cuban must wait in long lines to receive (usually substandard) care and cannot even purchase basic necessities such as aspirin while rich tourists and government officials get top-of-the-line treatment.

According to a WHO press release, this is the first time Cuba has occupied the presidency of the WHA, which rotates annually among the six regions of the WHO.

In his first address as president of the WHA, Morales Ojeda stated that his government considers its selection to lead the assembly "a recognition of the results achieved by the national health system, which is characterized for being unique, free, accessible, with universal coverage." This, of course, is precisely the sort of healthcare system run or sought by many members of the WHO, and thus it is worth considering just how Morales Ojeda's claims stack up to reality.

For starters, the system isn't "free." Every resident of Cuba pays for it with his personal liberty. The communist government, notwithstanding recent, small moves in the direction of economic freedom, still tightly controls its subjects' lives. Most Cubans work for the government, earning an average of about $19 a month; those employed privately are subject to an income tax; food and other necessities are rationed; and dissent from the party line is prohibited. Even then, the "free" care still costs them: Cubans complain of having to bring their own bedclothes and food with them to the hospital, and "many patients ... bring their doctors food, money or other gifts to get to the front of the queue or to guarantee an appointment for an X-ray, blood test or operation," Al Jazeera's Lucia Newman reported in 2012.

How about the Cuban system's accessibility and "universal coverage"? It all depends, it seems, on who is seeking

access.

“In Cuba there exists TWO health care systems — one for tourists, as well as Communist Party officials, and another for Cubans, who are forced to take with them even the most basic necessities when visiting a Cuban hospital; even aspirins are scarce,” Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), whose family fled Cuba when she was seven years old, told the *Miami Herald*.

A Cuban doctor told Larry Solomon of Canada’s *National Post* that “the tourist hospitals are excellent, the quality of care delivered to a high standard, as high as any you will find in any Western country.... The hospital pharmacies provide whatever drugs tourists require.” But, he added, “The government doesn’t give a s—t about the poor. The poor have no medicines, no painkillers, no nothing.”

Solomon confirmed this, noting the dearth of medicines in a Cuban neighborhood pharmacy he had visited and the fact that “begging for medicines is common in Havana — next to begging for food, it is the most common plea.” Natives know that tourists can use American dollars to buy drugs at the many pharmacies in hotels and other establishments that cater to tourists.

The hospitals for the average Cuban are also in dire straits. “I saw many hospitals where there was often no running water, the toilets did not flush, and the risk of infections — by the hospital’s own admission — was extremely high,” Newman recalled from her own experiences in Cuba in the late 1990s. Solomon noted that hospitals, too, lack access to drugs, leading to limb amputations or “painful therapies without painkillers.”

And that assumes one can even get to see a doctor in the first place. “Ordinary people must queue from dawn for a routine test, with no guarantee that the allotted numbers will not run out before it is their turn,” wrote Newman. “If you do not have a contact or money to pay under the table, the waiting time for all but emergency procedures can be ridiculously long.”

There are other problems with the Cuban healthcare system. In a 2007 article for *Cuban Affairs*, University of Oklahoma anthropology professor Katherine Hirschfeld observed:

Many Cubans (including a number of health professionals) also had serious complaints about the intrusion of politics into medical treatment and healthcare decision-making. There is no right to privacy in the physician-patient relationship in Cuba, no patients’ right of informed consent, no right to refuse treatment, and no right to protest or sue for malpractice. As a result, medical care in Cuba has the potential to be intensely dehumanizing.

Despite all these negatives, there are those who, in an effort to defend Cuba’s healthcare system, cite statistics claiming that Cubans are among the healthiest people in the world. These statistics, however, come from the Castro regime — hardly a trustworthy source. Moreover, some of the statistics have been achieved only by force. Hirschfeld wrote that the health ministry “sets statistical targets that are viewed as the equivalent of production quotas.”

One of the most commonly cited statistics is Cuba’s infant mortality rate; indeed, Morales Ojeda even mentioned it in his WHA speech. Critics say that rate is kept artificially low in two ways. First, any fetus showing the slightest abnormality will be aborted, with the mother given no say whatsoever in the matter. “We personally used to do 70 or 80 abortions a day,” one Cuban-exile doctor told ABC’s *20/20*. Second, “if a child dies a few hours after birth, they don’t count it as ever having lived,” other doctors told *20/20*.

Morales Ojeda did more than just toot his own horn at the WHA. He also called for “achieving a truly sustainable development,” adding that “people’s health is both a means to achieve it and at the same time an end.” In other words, he hopes to control individuals’ health in the name of “sustainability,” which, as *The New American* has reported, is a code word for a mixture of Marxism and environmentalism.

The new WHA president also stumped for international socialism, recalling that the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States agreed recently that “in order to achieve fairer societies in our region, a better distribution of wealth and incomes, quality education and health services for all, the eradication of illiteracy, the establishment of true food security, among other vital issues for the human life are essential.”

And as if his Marxist bona fides hadn’t been well enough established, he quoted Fidel Castro at length, claiming that “the main responsibility for the brutal destruction of the environment lies with the consumer societies” and that

international wealth redistribution is the solution to saving the Earth. However, as a recent Fraser Institute study showed, those countries with the most economic freedom — and therefore the greatest prosperity — have the lowest pollution levels. Freedom, not communism, is the way to a clean planet.

The WHO's elevation of Cuba to a position of prominence despite all the evidence that communism is exceedingly cruel and fails to deliver on its promises, including those regarding healthcare, should serve as a reminder that the WHO and the UN are still bent on a global Marxist regime — and that is not healthful for any of us.