

The continuation of a humanist tradition

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The Calixto Garica University Hospital, based in Havana continues to play a vital role in training the country's future physicians. Granma International took a moment to talk to five young Cuban doctors in training about what it means to study medicine in their country.

Cuban doctors are renowned for their work both in and outside of the island. The cornerstone of the country's free universal healthcare system, these medical professionals also have a long history of international collaboration with approximately 25,000 doctors currently offering services in 68 countries world wide (the majority in the Third World).

Cuban medicine is undoubtedly one of the country's crowning achievements.

With the establishment of free, universal education by the Revolution, medicine – a vital but traditionally elitist career more often than not reserved for the economically and socially privileged – not only became available to all, but has also defined the country's international solidarity efforts.

One of the institutions which played and continues to play a vital role in training the country's future physicians is the Calixto Garica University Hospital, based in Havana. Granma International took a moment to talk to five young Cuban doctors in training about what it's like, and what it means, to study medicine in their country.

First and foremost, all agreed, "Medicine is the most beautiful profession you can study."

Second year student Daniel Patiño Moro from the province of Las Tunas, knew he always wanted to become a doctor, given "the humanist vision which encompasses the occupation, and because from a very young age, I have been interested in the world of medicine, of helping people to be healthy and look after themselves, help increase their life expectancy, and their general well-being." A sentiment shared by his classmate Sebastian Mendoza Navarro who believes medicine should be a vocation "something that you feel."

Also motivated by the desire to help and heal is fifth year student Dianelis Sosa Ochoa who knew there was no other profession for her. Chebely Cabreja Moraga currently in her third year of study, however, hadn't planned on medicine as a career, but opted for the course after failing to secure her first choice of degree, a situation which according to the student has been nothing but positive. She noted that her interest in the profession has grown from day one, and has enjoyed embracing her natural desire to help people.

Daryll Hernández Vázquez currently in his third year also started out on a different path, studying Mathematics at the University of Havana before switching to medicine, and is happy he did so, saying that medicine is really "dynamic...you're always learning something new, being given new content."

In this regard they noted that one of the key positive aspects of the degree is its structure, combining theory and practice from day one – with an emphasis on preventative medicine and patient care. The result: a more interactive and effective learning experience which places the patient at the heart of the profession.

Dianelis noted that, alongside their studies, students participate in community health campaigns – working inside homes and neighborhoods, familiarizing themselves with the conditions, realities and everyday lives of their patients.

Chabely commented that at the University, "They don't teach you medicine, but rather how to be doctors." She went on to explain that students are encouraged to touch the patient, take time to get to know them, ask questions and listen to their responses, gain their trust, and show you care by communicating with them on a personal level.

Daryll notes that the course is designed to demand high standards from students, but also provides them with adequate and necessary support structures to cope with any difficulties they may encounter.

Their training is led by highly qualified professors, many specialists in their given fields. Daniel emphasized, "The standard of teaching is very high and as such we end up benefiting twofold, as we not only gain medical knowledge but also spiritual, and humanistic... A doctor should be there with knowledge in one hand and humanism in the other."

Dianelis and Sebastian agree noting that they have "no complaints," and described how their professors take an interest in their lives, and develop individual relationship with each pupil. However, other students at the institution commented that despite highly qualified staff, the difficulties which present themselves on a daily basis living in Cuba – be they transport issues or family crises – mean teachers' work is sometimes affected.

Still, as is well known, success isn't solely the responsibility of teachers. Sebastian rightly points out, "A professor can give you a good explanation, but if you don't do your part, show interest and put in the work, it won't amount to much."

Sacrifice is word all the students I spoke with used to describe what it's like to study medicine. Dianelis noted that work is intense but highly rewarding. Daryll welcomes the challenge of constantly developing his knowledge, and is inspired by the breadth of the profession which also includes training in traditional medicine from other cultures such as China.

And what of the future? From the first to the final year, all students are thinking about what comes next. Dianelis is interested in pediatrics, while Daryll likes the range of opportunities offered by medicine – from surgery to intensive care.

In the short-term Sebastian and Daniel are focused on offering services in Cuba, the former believing, "The best thing would be to spread all this love and knowledge gained throughout the course to your homeland, your country."

Daniel, however, would also consider serving abroad, and explains the complex relationship between the two: "Within the ways of seeing Cuba and the great homeland which for us is Latin America, I think of it as Marti did in his era, and the way Bolivar did in his time also. There exists a kind of paradox between studying and leaving to help people in other parts of the world and the truth is that... you must first do something for your people, you must do something to make your homeland grow."

All consider the experience to be positive and important, noting that the work of a doctor knows no bounds. Daryll highlighted a key factor about missions for young students saying, “If we have the opportunity to offer services abroad, then why not, because at the end of the day we are doctors, we are here to save lives and this care must be available to all. What must be clear is that we must recognize ourselves as Cuban doctors, we belong to Cuba. Working abroad also offers opportunities for greater professional development, learning about new cultures, other types of religions, people, environments, in other countries which need doctors.”

Sebastian rounds of the discussion stating that he is “proud to have been born in this country, and had the opportunity to study a profession which, despite requiring a great amount of sacrifice and hard work, has a beautiful result – that of serving humanity, and all those who need help anywhere in the world.”

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