

MEDIA RELEASE
19 October 2015

KZN Health HOD, Dr Sifiso Mtshali, urges Cuba-bound first year medical students to make KZN proud

KWAZULU-Natal Health Head of Department, Dr Sifiso Mtshali, has urged the 24 first year medical students who departed for Cuba today (19 October 2015) to get their priorities right, work hard and make full use of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to become doctors.

He was addressing the departing students at King Shaka International Airport.

Through the Mandela/Castro Medical Training Programme, KwaZulu-Natal has sent 907 students for medical training to Cuba. Today's compliment brings to 813 the total number of students from KwaZulu-Natal who are studying in Cuba, while 85 have already qualified as doctors and are fully employed by the Department.

Dr Mtshali urged the students to choose their friends carefully, and not succumb to social pressures that could derail their goals.

"As you go out of the plane today, there will be a lot going through your minds. You will think about your parents and your friends. It will not be easy, but you will have to be strong. Try to find a group with a positive outlook, and build your social support around them. Try and find friends who will build you. Identify people that you think you can work with. When I got to university I tried to find people with whom I shared common goals, and we were able to move forward together. It's more important in the field of medicine. Those people will become your friends for life.

"If you decide to be a loner, you will have problems. If you are the kind of person who can find solutions to problems on your own, remember there may be people out there who need you. Share with them. When I was a student, I found that I was learning more out of teaching other students."

Unpacking the rationale behind sending doctors for medical training in Cuba, Dr Mtshali said: "If you check the number of doctors we produce, it is very few. As a Government, not just in KZN, but nationally, we needed to find a way of training more doctors, so that it addresses our needs in the future. When you look at projections, and you look at the rate of attrition... people leaving for a variety of reasons... you see that we would have had a problem in the future. So you, as medical students, are our future. You are addressing that gap."

Dr Mtshali said most of the students on the programme were from rural areas, and they are encouraged to return as medical doctors and plough their skills back to their own communities.

The HOD said he was aware of reports that some Cuba-based medical students had encountered certain challenges, including becoming heavily involved in religious activities – to the detriment of their studies.

He urged the students not to ever forget why the Government was sending them to Cuba in the first place.

"I don't want you to be remembered only for church and prayer... We are sending you there to become doctors. Religion is something we encourage. Some of us were in the Student Christian Movement, but we still made it because we had priorities. So, it's all about planning, to say I'll dedicate so much time to what you're going there to do, and so much time for social and religious support. Try and strike a healthy balance."

He said Cuba would prepare the students to work effectively, in line with Government's strategy to re-engineer Primary Health Care, which encourages disease prevention and a community-oriented approach to health care. "You will be trained not only to deal with the problem, but also with other peripheral issues that impact on people's health. We want you come back and be able to fit in socially and culturally in your communities."



KwaZulu-Natal Health Head of Department, Dr Sifiso Mtshali, shares some pearls of wisdom with the medical students who are departing for Cuba.



KwaZulu-Natal Health Head of Department, Dr Sifiso Mtshali, with the medical students who are departing for Cuba.

Pictures by Themba Mngomezulu

ENDS