

Cuba-trained medical graduates are the pioneers for the re-engineering of primary healthcare, says KZN Health MEC

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KaZulu-Natal Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo has described the scores of Cuba-trained medical students who graduated in Durban today (14 July 2017) as pioneers of government's efforts to re-engineer primary healthcare in the country.

MEC Dhlomo was speaking at a graduation ceremony for 70 medical students (13 from KZN, and 57 from various parts of the country) who were conferred their medical degrees after studying in Cuba for six years and finishing at various South African universities, including the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

This high-level graduation ceremony was attended by, among others, deputy minister Dr Joe Phaahla, his Excellency: Cuban Ambassador, Carlos Fernández de Cossion; Deputy Minister of Health, Republic of Cuba, Dr Ileana Morales, and academics. There were also scores of jubilant and proud parents and relatives of the graduates.

Speaking on the sidelines of the event, MEC Dhlomo lauded the Mandela Fidel Castro Medical training programme, saying that since its inception, it has enabled South Africa to begin to address the shortage of doctors in the country by sending young aspirant doctors from poor communities for medical training in Cuban universities, while also recruiting some Cuban doctors to local shores.



KZN Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo with some of the 13 medical graduates from KwaZulu-Natal.

There are currently 2885 South African medical students in Cuba in various levels of study. No fewer than 590 doctors have already qualified from the Nelson Mandela Fidel Castro Medical training programme, while 98 students are doing their final year in South African medical schools.

South African medical students who study in Cuba spend a year learning Spanish; five years of academic medical studies; 18 months of being integrated into the South African medical health system (South Africa has a different disease profile compared to Cuba); as well as one year of internship.

MEC Dhlomo said the success and impact of this partnership with Cuba has now drawn the attention of the Institute for Global Health Innovation - Imperial College, London, who recently invited a South African delegation to attend a conference titled: Human Resources For Health And Economic Growth - Learning From The Cuban Experience In Medical Education.

The reason why governments in developing countries such as ours and the Angolans and many others hold Cuba in such high regard is because of the high quality of medical training that the Cubans offer. Their approach to healthcare is different in that it promotes disease prevention instead of focusing on cure, which is unsustainable.

As a result, their health outcomes are excellent. The Cubans have even managed to eradicate mother-to-child transmission of HIV, malaria, TB and others. In Cuba, doctors are judged not on the number of leg and arm amputations they make, but on how well they have done to promote health literacy, prevent diseases, trauma and injuries. Because of this strong emphasis on health education and health promotion, people in Cuba only develop hypertension and other non-communicable diseases quite late in life. This is precisely why we are duplicating the Cuban model. We are working extremely hard to re-engineer our own primary healthcare system to turn it into one whereby health care is provided in the community, with people making an initial approach to a medical practitioner or clinic for advice or treatment.

The day's keynote speaker, deputy minister Phaahla, thanked the Cuban Government and its people for this partnership; as well as their solidarity with countries that suffer from disasters. Most recently Cuban doctors and nurses played a critical role in managing the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. *We are deeply indebted to the Cuban Government for their tremendous support to South Africa and the contributions that Cuba continues to make to the realization of the dreams of the South African population. We acknowledge and appreciate the good partnership that we enjoy with the South African medical schools including other stakeholders who are working tirelessly with the Ministry and Department of Health to strengthen the healthcare system. We recognise the efforts and contributions of the academic stakeholders towards broadening the training platform in order to accommodate more students within local institutions.*

Dr Phaahla said the programme is achieving a number of critical objectives in supporting the transformation of health in South Africa, in the following ways:

- It strengthens the ability of the South African government to ensure a better life for all and a long and healthy life for all by increasing the number of qualified doctors and thus improving access to health care in support of our National Health Insurance system;
- Improving health outcomes –the Cuban model is based on the Primary Health Care approach in line with the Alma Ata declaration. *My hope is that through our RSA Cuban trained doctors will play a significant role in assisting us to ensure that South Africa's health outcomes approximate those of Cuba.*
- Supporting human resource and economic development by providing access to medical training for large numbers of young South Africans from under-served areas who would otherwise not have had this opportunity.
- Providing on-going and sustained provision of doctors to the rural areas of our country.

"South African medical graduates returning from Cuba have proven their competence in skills that are essential to primary health care, particularly with a focus on the social determinants of health. These skills are essential to ensure that we strengthen the re-engineering of primary health care.

The Cuban approach emphasizes 'community diagnosis' as a core training component and promotes interventions that target the needs of the community. In contrast the South African approach is a curative, patient diagnosis approach.

The Cuban training model also promotes patient empowerment. The students learn to be doctors who bring social change to their patients and communities. The Cuban health system promotes an inter-disciplinary team approach. There is a close relationship between the family doctor and

nurse within the community in Cuba. There are also a series of specialist doctors that supports the family doctor," said Dr Phaahla.