

The sweet sound of being called Dr for the first time – a Cuba-trained doctor's story

14 August 2017

NHLANHLA Khuzwayo, an A-student who comes from an impoverished home at Ozwathini, stood very little chance of becoming a doctor. But thanks to the Mandela Fidel Castro Medical training programme, Khuzwayo, 22, is currently studying medicine in Cuba, and is more than halfway towards realising his dream. .

Khuzwayo was among the 302 medical students who are being trained in Cuba who have been back home for the school holidays, and had a debriefing session with MEC Dhlomo in Durban today (14 August 2017).

He is in his fourth year of studying, and has spent the past two weeks getting practical experience at Appelsbosch Hospital. He has described being called Dr Khuzwayo for the first time by patients and hospital staff as “a sweet, humbling and amazing experience.” “Studying to become a medical doctor is a great opportunity that I might not have had, had it not been for this programme. I am very grateful to the KZN Department of Health. Studying in Cuba has made me realise how fortunate I've been to get this rare opportunity to study free of charge.

Reflecting on the experience of doing his practicals at Appelsbosch, he said: “When I arrived at the hospital, I was a little apprehensive. I was given my own consultation room I thought I would sit and wait for the doctor. I was amazed when I was told that I'm the second doctor on call. They gave me a speed dial, and said, 'If you have a problem, call us.'”



MEC Dhlomo with Nhlanhla Khuzwayo, one of the students who are receiving medical training in Cuba

Soon, Khuzwayo was consulting with patients, examining them and writing prescriptions for medicine. “I was dealing with internal medicine. I saw an old lady who was complaining of coughing and chest pains. She said she had been coughing for a while and that her chest was painful when she coughed. I knew immediately that she was a suspected case for TB. The first thing I did was to send her for an X-Ray, and also to get a sputum culture (test). Another patient came in complaining of pain in the abdomen. He said he was feeling weak, and was also sweaty at night. I gave him a drip, and gave him medication to deal with abdominal pains... Those are

just a few examples, but all in all, it's been an enjoyable experience." He added that humility is a key part of being a doctor.

"I'm a 22 year-old, but I've had nursing sisters who are in their 50s, as old as my own mother, showing me respect. So, you must never have pride. Respect everyone, because everyone respects a doctor. Even in the community, being a doctor is not a small thing. I am very glad that good things are emerging out of this Cuban medical training problem. Yes, there might be challenges here and there, but the great news is that this programme is going to produce a large number of doctors. We are going to make a very big difference."

Various speakers at the debriefing session - from the medical students to KZN Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo to health portfolio committee members MPLs Ntuthuko "Jomo" Sibiya and Linda Hlongwa-Madlala - lauded the Mandela Fidel Castro Medical training programme, saying it has begun to help the country and province to address the shortage of doctors.

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 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.

Addressing the students, Sibiya urged them to work hard and said that only an ANC government could decide to invest in black children in this manner. "I'm told that studying under this programme costs almost R1million per student. It's a miracle. It's what this ANC government is about. It's to make sure you take charge as a black child. "

Our health standard is going to improve a great deal thanks to you, and this approach from Cuba where emphasis is placed on preventing diseases, rather than relying on cure. It is heart-warming to think that in three to four years' time, you will be practicing as doctors. We are very, very proud of you. Nobody ever thought that one day so many young, black children can study to become doctors. To us, you are doctors because nothing will stop you. The money will be there to ensure that you finish your studies. Historically, in this country, medicine was reserved for a particular race, but today it is going to be dominated by you. And you are leaders. Doctors are leaders. Whether in a rural area or township, doctors are leaders because you are saving lives. You're not just a doctor, but a leader in your own right. It's just amazing."

He added that he is aware that studying in Cuba means that students have to forgo certain luxuries, such as unlimited internet access and Whatsapp connectivity. He urged the students to persevere and keep their eye on the prize.

"Because you know where you want to go, just make sure when you are there to do nothing else, except study. Just study. Three to four years is nothing. Once you complete your studies, your future will be brighter than anyone else's. The country will be safe hands because of you. When you are injected into the system, it will change altogether. We will have doctors who will look at health in a different way. Because of you, our people will live longer, not because of a miracle, but because of the role you will play in our society."

"We need young patriotic doctors, who are going to love this country... People who understand where we are coming from and where we are going. If there are any issues with this programme, they will be dealt with."

Fellow MPL, Hlongwa-Madlala urged the students to be disciplined. "We want to remind you to love your patients. Love your patients, in Cuba and here back home when you come back. Be selfless. We would not be here if our forebears were not selfless. In anything that you do, be thorough. Even the bible says so. Respect your patients. When people come there, they place their hope in you. Apartheid ravaged us as a nation. When people come to you, they have hope. Don't make them lose hope. Once we elevate you as black people, please don't be arrogant. You

are serving the public. You are writing your own history. South Africa will never be the same because of you."

MEC Dhlomo said the success and impact of this partnership with Cuba had now drawn the attention of first world countries. "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 medical students will start returning to Cuba to resume their studies in the coming weeks.