

Painful end of a dream for young Cuban medical doctor

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AFTER being on holiday and missing his flight back to Cuba - losing a whole academic year in 2014 - a disappointed Sibusiso Thanks Ngeleka bade his time at home until another opportunity to resume his studies arose. When he finally left for Cuba in 2015, he made a vow to his family that he would only see them in three years' time, when he would be almost ready to graduate as a doctor. Two days ago, he came back home in a coffin. Tears flowed from all round as Ngeleka, who would have turned 24 a week ago, was laid to rest at his home at KwaNzimakwe near Margate, on the south coast of KwaZulu-Natal.

Ngeleka and Sihle Cebo Makhaye – fourth and fifth year medical students respectively - had been part of a group of students who had hired a house to celebrate the birthday of one of their fellow compatriots in Havana, Cuba on the night of 02 December 2017. It is alleged that on they decided to go and “cool down” in the swimming pool. When they did not return, their friends started a frantic search for them. After Makhaye was discovered inside the pool, he was rushed to hospital, but demised on the way. The group, meanwhile, continued the search for Ngeleka, who was also found in the pool having already demised.

Speaking at the funeral, KwaZulu-Natal Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo, who flew in from Johannesburg this morning, thanked the South African Government and the Cuban Embassy for facilitating the repatriation of the two students' mortal remains. He said that while the demise of a healthcare professional is always a disaster, bidding farewell to a young man whom he got to know personally was most painful.

“We are deeply hurt by what has happened. In many instances, you find that these children are born to mothers who work as cleaners... people who sell peanuts to make a living.” He said that the Mandela Fidel Castro Medical programme, under which the students are trained, is important in that while it addresses the shortage of doctors in the country, it does so while giving a golden opportunity to poor but academically deserving students to realise their dreams to become somebody in life one day. “We are deeply thankful to the ANC government and our Cuban counterparts for having the vision and will to invest in the African child in this manner. The majority of these young people are from the most rural parts of our country, where no-one ever dreamed that a doctor would one day emerge. They just did would not stand a chance.

“These students not only become the beacons of hope for the country, but for their homes and communities. They become an inspiration to other young people, while fulfilling the much-needed healthcare needs of rural communities in areas where many people do not want to go and work. “There is also heavy reliance on them by their families, as they are expected to assist financially and otherwise. Therefore, for us, when a child who is a young healthcare student dies, it is one death too many. It is a disaster because these are people who are champions of the primary health care model, which is practiced in Cuba and focuses on prevention of diseases rather than treatment.”

MEC Dhlomo said that 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. “The Cubans have managed to eradicate mother-to-child transmission of HIV, malaria, TB and others. 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 through the training of these doctors. 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. This is why moments like today are deeply heart-breaking. It's the painful end of a dream. Our hearts are bleeding.”

It also emerged at the funeral that psychologists have been sent to Cuba to counsel students who were traumatized by the drownings. In a show of empathy, the Cuba-based students have also raised R8000 for the Ngeleka families and another R8000 for the Makhayes.

Sibusiso's grandmother, Mancane Ngeleka, and other relatives thanked the South Africa government for the continuous support that her family has received since the bereavement.

Inkosi Bhekizizwe Nzimakwe said: “As KwaNzimakwe tribe we have lost out... We have lost out a great deal because this was going to be a doctor who was going to come back and heal our people. As MEC Dhlomo said recently, chances are this young man would have come back and married another doctor. Then we would have had two doctors. We have lost someone who was really going to help us.”

MEC Dhlomo will attend the funeral of Cebo Makhaye at Manguzi tomorrow.

ENDS

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MEC Dhlomo speaks at the funeral of Sibusiso Ngeleka



MEC Dhlomo with his wife Mrs Nono Dhlomo and Ugu health district director Ms Ntokozo Mkhize