

Cuba-bound medical students urged to keep working hard and do the country proud; KZN ANCYL and SACP YCL express full support for the programme and hit out at those calling for its abolishment

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"WORK hard, focus your study and don't be derailed from achieving your big goal of becoming a doctor." That is the message, in a nutshell, that was conveyed today by KZN Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo and other leaders, to a group of 206 fourth and fifth-year medical students who are returning to Cuba, after being home for the holidays since early July 2018. The official send-off of the students, held at Inkosi Albert Luthuli Central Hospital, was also attended by the leadership of the ANC Youth League, as well as SACP Young Communist League.

Both youth formations threw their weight behind the Cuba-RSA medical doctor training programme, with ANCYL provincial secretary Thanduxolo Sabela hitting out at those who are calling for its abolishment, and saying that they seek to thwart the empowerment of the African child

"We're very excited to be part of this programme, where we were given an opportunity to deliver a message of support to the students. We've sent a message to them that they must take their studies seriously, as this country does lack doctors, especially Black doctors. We've seen that 99,9% of those who were attending today were Africans. We are short of African doctors, so it makes us extremely proud as the youth of South Africa when we see them studying to become medical doctors

"We've also urged them not to end at being just general doctors. We wish for them to also specialize. We also highlighted the challenges facing the Department of Health in South Africa, particularly KZN... the challenge of oncology sector. Many patients are dying because of cancer, because of the shortage of doctors who have specialized in oncology. We've encouraged them to consider specializing in oncology (and other medical disciplines), for the benefit of our communities."

Sabela also urged the students to exercise their right to vote in next year's general elections, even though they will be in a foreign country.

Responding to criticism of the medical doctor training programme, Sabela said: *"We've also received report from members of the Parliament that the DA in Parliament has raised that this programme must be cut off, as part of the so-called cost-cutting measures. We strongly object to that as the Youth League. We know who the DA represents. The DA is a party of white people in the main, and white people of this country can afford to send their children to study medicine anywhere in the world. So, they're continuing with their programme of trying to keep the Black child down. That is why we are saying we will never rest if the government even considers closing down this programme. We support this programme 100%, and we are willing to take it to the streets, if the government considers this proposal from the DA, which is aimed at bringing down the Black child. MEC Dhlomo is one of those leaders who are fully behind the training of our students in Cuba. We will continue supporting him in this initiative. Here, we had Black children who come from deep rural areas, who are actually going to become doctors. It's a proud moment for us as the Youth League. It makes us proud to be South African, and to be members of the ANC, when the ANC is doing such good things in society."*

Acting Head of Department Dr Musa Gumede supported Mr Sabela's call for medical doctors to advance themselves and become medical specialists. He said that some of the challenges faced by the Department today are as a result of a historical failure by some to design specialised training programmes that respond to the country's health needs. This, he said, is the reason behind the reconstitution of the committee that admits doctors who want to specialise





“Specialising is very important. In the past, this committee was left to academics. We’ve taken those powers back... We’ve said, ‘you’re training for the country. You’re not training just because you have an interest in a certain field. The country has needs. You need to understand the country’s needs and then determine numbers, so that we’re able to build capacity.’ We wouldn’t have had challenges with oncology if we understood the country’s needs. We’ve got these challenges because we had people dealing with first world problems when our reality is different. They were pushing people to do research on things that had absolutely nothing to do with South Africa. So, we’ve pulled it back to the Department. We’re changing the numbers and the direction. We’re changing the dynamics of how training happens. Most of the problems that we have are because training is not in our hands. But we’ve said, ‘If you’re using our money, let’s have a voice regarding what training goes on where.’ So, if you hear some small squabbles happening, it’s because we’re trying to change that dynamic.”

Dr Gumede said the Department’s relationship with medical schools has been drastically improved, which has made engagement with academic institutions much easier. MEC Dhlomo thanked the ANCYL and YCL for its support of the programme, and urged the Cuba-bound students to focus on their studies so that they can make their families and communities proud.

Addressing the students, he said: *“There’s a lot of pressure on you to go back and complete your studies. You must come back and wipe away the tears from your families, and be good citizens who are able to contribute economically, and uplift your families... help your mothers build homes, and get a good socio-economic status in your families, before you can even come up and help us as doctors. You must look forward to going back, because young must come back after completing your studies and break the chain of poverty at home, but also contribute in improving our health systems I look up to you as the brightest of them all. I did medicine myself, but always had my family around me. Whenever there were challenges, I always had my family to help me navigate my challenges. But you are far from your parents, and have to make do with whatever little that you have. So, we urge you to work hard, and make sure you use existing channels to communicate whatever difficulties you might encounter.”*

Student Ntokozo Gumbi, from Phongolo in Zululand District, who leaves this weekend to begin his fifth year in Cuba, said he was looking forward to completing his studies in Cuba, and be re-integrated into the South African health system next year.

“Cuba has one of the best training programmes in the world for a doctor. The exposure to patients, treatment of patients, and the skills we’re getting there are very good. When we come back for vacation work, we see the skills learnt in Cuba working. They take us very far. We are really appreciative of the Department of Health, both national and provincial. We thank them for this opportunity.”

"I want to come back and empower the youth, more especially because many people are not health literate where I come from. When we come back we want to start health centres, so that we can impart more knowledge on our fellow compatriots on how to prevent diseases. It's not about curing diseases, because sometimes it's not easy, but the focus should be on preventing them. I want to come back and empower my own people, so that they can empower others."