

Cuba Trains Hundreds of Haitian Doctors to Make a Difference

Text & Photos by Anna Kovac

August 6, 2007 – This July, 63 more Cuban-trained Haitian doctors graduated from the Latin American Medical School (ELAM)-Santiago Campus. This entire third graduating class is already back home doing two years of social service as required by the Haitian Health and Population Ministry and as part of their pledge to help their communities in return for scholarships.[1] These new Haitian doctors will be working with the Cuban Medical Team which has been in Haiti since December 4th, 1998 after Hurricane Georges devastated the island. They will join the other 226 ELAM-trained Haitian doctors working alongside Cubans, (128 from the class of 2005 and 98 from the class of 2006), boosting the total of Cuban-trained Haitian doctors working back in Haiti to 289.



Students from Mali, Haiti, and Djibouti are studying medicine for free at the ELAM-Santiago Campus.

Recently the Cuban Medical Team of some 500 doctors and other health specialists broadened its coverage from 86 municipalities to 123 – soon they will be in all 134 municipalities nationwide. Haiti, one of the poorest countries in the world,[2] has fewer than 2,000 doctors to treat a population of over 8 million; according to the Pan American Health Organization “40% of the population has no access to basic health care”.[3] The Cuban Minister was joined Friday morning by other prominent Cuban health and international cooperation authorities for a first-ever marathon of Internet questions from the world over on the topic of Cuba’s global health cooperation.

Cuban Medical Team in Haiti, Selected Statistics: December 1998-May 2007

Statistic	Total
Visits to the doctor	10,682,124
Doctor visits to the patient	4,150,631
Attended births	86,633
Major and minor surgeries	160,283
Vaccinations	899,829
Lives saved (emergency)	210,852

Source: Ministry of Foreign Relations (MINREX), International Cooperation, May 2007

The ELAM in Santiago de Cuba

The Santiago de Cuba Higher Institute of Medical Sciences is home both to the ELAM- Santiago Campus and the province's medical school. Director Dr Antonio Lopez told *Cuba Health Reports* the Institute has grown dramatically since its founding 45 years ago with 63 students. Today there are 18,333 students in five schools - two medical, and one each for nursing, dentistry and allied health sciences. Dr Lopez said the Institute works with 26 teaching polyclinics in all nine municipalities of Santiago de Cuba, as well as in the small nearby rural municipalities of Palma Soriano and Contramaestre.



Students from Africa and the Caribbean meet with Cuba Health reports on campus in Santiago de Cuba.

The ELAM was launched in 1999 when the Cuban government began offering 10,000 scholarships to students in countries where Cuban medical teams were assisting the local health systems; these bi-lateral cooperation arrangements are known as the Comprehensive Health Program (CHP). The idea behind the ELAM is for graduates to eventually replace the Cuban doctors in their countries working in the CHP. The program has been broadened to include countries based on medical education needs (eg, the United States, Pakistan), regardless of whether a CHP agreement is in place.

The Santiago Higher Institute of Medical Sciences encompasses the Santiago-ELAM campus, where the majority of students are from Haiti, (over 650), Mali and Djibouti, plus some Cuban students, and the provincial medical school. The latter is somewhat different in that 75% of the student body is Cuban and the remaining 25% (426 students) hail from 16 countries including Mexico, Nicaragua, Colombia, Ecuador, and the English- and French-speaking Caribbean. The foreign students at this school do their first two years of basic sciences training at ELAM's Havana campus; thereafter students do four years of clinical rotation in Cuban medical schools in 14 provinces around the country. (For more see, <http://www.saludthefilm.net/ns/elam.html>).

Dr Lopez noted that all students - Cuban and foreign - share the same facilities, the same dormitories, the same classes, and the same cafeteria. "There is no special treatment, they all share the same good things and the same difficulties." He added that "Haitian students study diligently and get very high grades. They are in the 98th percentile."

The Cuban Teaching Method

However getting high grades are only part of the learning process. Dr Silvia Reinoso Ortega, Vice Director for Academic Affairs at the Institute, told *Cuba Health Reports* that their goal is to develop ever better teaching methods and concepts. She explained that Cuban medical training is based on connecting theory to practice early on, with a strong emphasis on prevention. To achieve this, students accompany professors in 'university polyclinics' to learn.

Fifth-year Haitian student Stephanie Voyard told *Cuba Health Reports* she likes the Cuban method of teaching because it's practical. "From the first year, we have a class on community medicine to help us get to know the population, where we learn alongside family doctors. In the second year we work with doctors in polyclinics and from the third year on, in hospitals. Before we get our diplomas, we've already learned from experience."

Voyard said when she goes back to Haiti on vacation she meets with friends that are studying medicine to compare notes. Once she attended a biochemistry course a year ahead of her. “I already knew most of what the professor was saying because I had studied it before in Cuba.” She noted that about 100 students are admitted to the public Haitian Medical School each year and about half drop out because of academic or economic difficulties. She added that private universities are beyond the reach of most Haitians.

Student evaluation is different in Cuba than in Haiti, according to Voyard; unlike in Haiti where only the final exam counts and students arrive late or just don't go to class, in Cuba they are very strict and evaluate punctuality, attendance, and participation, which is taken into account along with tests. “At the end, even if you get 100% on the final exam, you can't get the top mark if you don't have good marks, attendance, etc, ...that helps us because it develops the good habits and ethics we'll need as doctors.”

Working in Haiti

Since the health situation in Cuba is very different from most developing countries (see chart), it's important for these students to connect theory with practice, Dr Rosa Duconger, Dean of the Santiago-ELAM campus told *Cuba Health Reports*. For this reason, after five years of studying and developing skills in Cuba, 6th year students put them to the test and consolidate what they know in their own countries.

Selected Indicators: Cuba, Haiti & Mali

Indicator	Cuba	Haiti	Mali
Population	11,277,000	8,528,000	13,518,000
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	5	84	120
Maternal mortality rate (per 100,000 live births)	49	520	580
Life expectancy at birth (M/F)	75/79	53/56	45/47
Births attended by skilled health personnel	100%	24%	41%
Total physicians	71,489	1,949	1,053
Physician density (per 1,000 population)	6.34	0.25	0.08
Total nurses	28,324	834	6,387
Nurse density (per 1,000 population)	2.5	0.11	0.49
% of population with sustainable access to improved drinking water	96	54	57
% of population infected with HIV	0.09*	3.8**	1.7**
TB prevalence (per 100,000 population)	4.9	405	578

Source: All Haiti and Mali data from WHO Statistical Information System (WHOSIS; <http://www.who.int/whosis/en/>), World Health Statistics, 2007, unless otherwise noted.

All Cuba data from *Annual Health Statistics Yearbook, 2006*. National Health Statistics Bureau. Havana: 2007, unless otherwise noted.

*National STI Prevention Center, Havana, Cuba.

**WHO/UNAIDS

"In the beginning we weren't sure, but when we saw these Haitian students in the field with the Cuban Medical Teams in Haiti, and we saw how much they had learned and knew, and how advanced they were as professionals, we realized this field work was important for rounding out their training," Dean Duconger said. In 2005, 80 Haitian students did their final term in Haiti, in 2006, 80 more, and this year all 63.

Cuban-trained doctors, like Cuban doctors, treat everybody regardless of class, color, religion, or political beliefs. This became evident during years of violent political turmoil in Haiti when the Cuban Medical Team helped all who needed help. Dean Duconger told *Cuba Health Reports* informal surveys done among patients, family members, and local health workers showed a high degree of acceptance of the Cuban-trained students and doctors. Importantly, steps have been taken at the governmental level to recognize ELAM degrees in Haiti. Doctors studying in Cuba are trained to ask questions, visit people in their homes, and treat using a community- and problem-based approach so as to understand a patient's complete health picture. Dean Duconger explained that these skills are very important in the developing world where many tests with sophisticated equipment are unavailable or too costly. She said students "have to know how to examine patients thoroughly, establish priorities for treatment within the system, and take into consideration the available resources. You can't learn this theoretically. You have to live it." And Haitian doctors trained in Cuba have lived it, they speak Creole and understand Haitian culture and idiosyncrasies. Dean Duconger spoke with pride about her students, about how responsible and how disciplined they are, how they spare no effort to save lives. "It's not enough to be a good doctor. You have to care and this is what we teach our students. It's the humanistic approach. And I saw the results in Haiti." Dean Duconger said she witnessed students who used to complain about leaky faucets or problems with the telephone or food at the Santiago-ELAM campus, dipping into their own pockets in Haiti to buy medicine for needy patients. In Haiti, 104 ELAM-trained doctors that graduated in 2005 have just finished their studies for a special degree in Comprehensive General Medicine under the supervision of the Cuban Team.

Future of International Health Cooperation in Haiti

In March 2007 in Port of Prince, Cuba, Venezuela, and Haiti signed an agreement to pool resources in order to establish 12 Comprehensive Diagnostic Centers - one in each Haitian Department (province or state) and three in the capital.[4] In addition to having ultrasound, X-ray, electrocardiogram, intensive care, and other state-of-the-art equipment, these centers will also be university-level teaching centers where Cuban- and locally-trained Haitian doctors will be able to obtain specialized degrees. The first Center will open in early fall in Gonaives, a northern town that was devastated by Tropical Storm Jeanne in 2004. Some 3,000 people lost their lives in the tragedy. The Cuban Medical Team was one of the few humanitarian missions that stayed to help the sick and injured despite political violence.

According to government statistics, volunteer doctors participating in Cuba's Comprehensive Health Programs in 101 countries have treated over 245 million people and have saved 1,391,907 lives in emergency care.[5] The developing world is in urgent need for such highly-trained humane doctors. Cuba's ambitious plan to train hundreds of Haitian doctors in humanistic medicine in Cuba and in Haiti, may be part of the answer.

http://www.medicc.org/publications/cuba_health_reports/018.php

Notes & References

1. All students at the Latin American Medical School receive full, six-year scholarships in return for this non-binding commitment.
2. In the 2006 Human Development Index which measures relative development among UN member nations and is published annually by the United Nations Development Programme, Haiti ranked 154th out of 177 countries. Available from <http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/statistics/documents/hdi2004.pdf>
3. Pan American Health Organization. Health for All: The Challenge of Haiti. PAHO. Washington, DC: Sept 2006.
4. This trilateral cooperation is part of the regional integration project known as ALBA (the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas), which strives to offer an economic integration model based on social welfare and equity.
5. Speech by Cuban Council of State Vice President Esteban Lazo, Port of Prince, Haiti, July 2007.