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Venezuela's Medical Care and its Cuban Influence



By George Meyer, MD

I RECENTLY RETURNED FROM participating in the 15th Venezuelan Congress of Internal Medicine on the island of Margarita, north of the mainland.

I have become convinced through my travels that good doctors practice good medicine in every country. Some have more and expensive tools. The ones without expensive toys are as effective using the history and physical examination tools that we should be teaching our students.

The Venezuelan medical education system is similar to that seen in most other countries. It is a 6-year program beginning after high school. Prospective doctors spend the first five years as students and on the wards in their schools.

Then they do a sixth year rotating through internal medicine, surgery, pediatrics, and ob/gyn (probably the equivalent of our subinternships). They also do an obligatory four months in rural medicine. After graduation they must do a year in rural medicine before they can get a license or go into a residency program.

There have been 12 medical universities in Venezuela, which graduate anywhere from 2,000–2,500 students per year. This has always seemed to be enough graduates to care for the population of the country.

However, recently there has been a downward trend in the numbers of residents entering, not just internal medicine, but most of the other important specialties in medicine. This downward trend started several years ago but hit a new low this year. Many graduates are emigrating to Spain, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and Canada.

Only a couple of residencies were filled this year, one of which is plastic surgery. One only need look at the young women in the country to understand why this is so. It has been said that, if a boy pays for his girl friend to have a breast augmentation, she often leaves him. (Is this like the saying that if a girl knits her boy friend a sweater, he leaves her?)

Recently the government opened several new medical schools, with the idea that these graduates will perform community care similar to that practiced in Cuba. These schools are only half way through their 6-year curriculum, with the government planning to graduate 100,000 students by 2015.

In the meantime, many Cuban doctors are giving care in the barrios, or poorer communities. Of about 10,000

doctors in the barrios, roughly 90 percent are Cuban. It appears the level of care may not be the same as that provided by traditionally trained Venezuelan doctors, and that the patients often go around those barrio doctors to the tertiary hospitals. Consequently the tertiary hospitals are overcrowded.

I was told that at least a third of the Cuban doctors no longer practice in Venezuela, though I do not know the reason.

The Venezuelan people are wonderful. The Chavistas — supporters of President Hugo Chavez — are easy to identify from their red shirts. (I avoided wearing my red “T” shirt while there). We tried to go to Angel Falls in Canaima (Paradise Falls in the new Pixar movie UP), but it was not in season and the cost was extremely pricey. I have seen some pictures of the National Park in Canaima, and it is an extraordinary place.

geowmeyer1@earthlink.net