

HEALTH FOR ALL

A Medical Tour of Cuba

Nasim H Naqvi

During last decade or so Cuba has become a popular destination for the European tourists. A British tour operator is also organising tours of Cuba for those interested in observing how health care is provided there. This writer was among a group of 15, mainly doctors, nurses, a teacher and a musician who recently visited Cuba. The itinerary was interesting; apart from Havana visitors travelled to other cities and walked in a remote mountainous region visiting a village clinic.

The first event in Havana was the most interesting and memorable—a 4-hour-meeting with Dr Aleida Guevara, a paediatrician and daughter of Che Guevara who himself was a doctor.

Dr Aleida Guevara, down to earth simple woman with a lot of sense of humour answered many a question. When asked personal questions about her iconic father she was very frank but full of emotions. Her beloved 'Pappa' loved her very much despite long absences during a bloody guerrilla war. She laughed describing her experiences in other countries she had visited. She was amused when in Kerala, the only communist state in India they brought the biggest elephant for her to ride because she was the daughter of the most famous freedom fighter. A committed socialist passionately protected Cuban socialism convincingly arguing that the failure of Soviet Socialism was because of the lies they told to their own people and top to bottom corruption in their ranks that let the system down.

Next day in the afternoon a fairly senior civil servant from the department of health introduced the Cuban Health Service. He started telling that in Cuba the universal free health service is determined by the constitution. His presentation in English was packed with impressive statistics, only few are recorded below :

	1959	2009
Life expectancy	60 years	78 years
Infant mortality	60/1000	4.7/1000
Total number of doctors	6286	78,416
Medical schools	1	72
Nurses	?	9.5/1000 patients

He also pointed out some vigorous preventive programmes that have eradicated a number of devastating diseases that are still prevalent even in advanced countries. For example Polio was eradicated long time ago, encephalitis and diphtheria in about 1987, measles and rubella in 1995, malaria has almost disappeared in Cuba. They also manufacture a number of vaccines for their own use and for export and have very active research programme.

Cuba also has free education from primary to university level, providing even two sets of uniforms per year to school children and transport with free lunch to those living outside walking distance from their schools. The literacy rate is almost 100% today.

In old Havana there is a child and maternal day clinic Hogar Materno Infantil, named after a midwife. A gynaecologist introduced the daily routine. Another visit was arranged to a day geriatric home, where old people from local community come during the day get lunch and if they need physiotherapy, acupuncture, massage or other similar therapies are provided by the trained therapists. The local family doctors take care of any medical problems. The old population of Cuba is increasing fast due to better life expectancy. Unfortunately a scheduled visit to a major hospital and medical school was cancelled because of a change to the visa regulation which took place too soon before the visit to enable new visas to be issued.

A short visit to a pharmacy museum in Havana was interesting. It was an old pharmacy; it was packed with medicinal jars stored wall to wall in glass cabinets. The counter nearly 10 metre long and glass cabinets were beautifully crafted of mahogany (word derived from Red Indian language). It was mentioned that all exhibits were Cuban made and were not imported.

On a Sunday a visit to a remote primary care or family doctor clinic was organised. The doctor showed hand written notes recorded each week of pregnant women attending the clinic and how complications might be prevented by referring early to the secondary medical facilities or polyclinics. The doctor was quite open about shortages in basic supplies of medicines and other essential provisions. It was a small community of about 1000 houses, people were poor living in poor housing but every house was supplied with electricity, water and gas, the meters were visible outside the houses.

Since the revolution the government has followed dynamic politics to protect nature and has planted huge areas with trees and other plants. One such area is called Topes de Collantes National Park in Sierra del Escambray Mountains. It was barren 40 years ago, now it is a lush green popular park where both locals and tourists come to enjoy nature and numerous recreational facilities provided. A well informed naturalist showed a number of medicinal plants growing in the area. Many plants or trees were not indigenous to Cuba but were brought in from faraway lands and carefully cultivated.

The Cubans are nature loving people and know how to live with it, a forte other people should learn from them. It was surprising to discover that on the Cuban islands there are no poisonous snakes or other stinging creatures and also no large wild mammals but the country is a heaven for bird watchers with a huge diversity of beautiful chirping birds. The country was peaceful with low crime rate and there was no fear for personal safety. A police man with a gun was not in sight. □□□