

Cuba Dr Diplomat

Exporting medicine and influence

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IT MAY be the world's largest medical college. The Latin American School of Medical Science, on the western edge of Havana, has 10,000 students, making it nearly ten times the size of its largest equivalent in the United States. The students are all foreigners: most are from elsewhere in Latin America, but they include 91 Americans. The school is one of several ways in which communist Cuba is using its medical prowess to win friends abroad.

Reuters



A miracle of Cuban know-how and Venezuelan oil money

That prowess has been questioned by some of the regime's opponents because of unofficial reports that Fidel Castro, Cuba's president, has undergone three failed operations for diverticulitis (a swelling of the wall of the intestine). But there is as yet no reason to blame the president's doctors for his health problems.

The medical school was founded in 1998. Only two classes have so far graduated from its six-year programme. Its buildings are not imposing; many of its students are dispersed on satellite campuses around Cuba. But tuition, accommodation and board are all free.

The school is only one aspect of Cuba's commitment to exporting medicine. Another is the deployment of Cuban doctors overseas. Hundreds were sent to Central America in the aftermath of hurricanes and other natural disasters in the 1990s. More than 15,000 doctors and dentists are working for Hugo Chávez's government in Venezuela, in a Cuban-designed family-doctor programme. Others have been sent to Bolivia, to support Evo Morales's government, and to Ecuador. More may go to Nicaragua, and to Ecuador: both countries recently elected presidents friendly to Mr Castro. Farther afield, Pakistan's prime minister this month singled out Cuban doctors for their help after a 2005 earthquake which killed some 74,000 people.

In all, about one in three of Cuba's doctors is working abroad at any given time, according to Daniel Erikson of the Inter-American Dialogue, a think-tank in Washington, DC. At the same time, increasing numbers of foreigners are coming to Cuba for operations. This began as a foreign-exchange earner in the 1990s. More recently, Mr Chávez and Mr Castro set up “Operation Miracle”, a scheme under which Venezuela pays for thousands of poor Latin Americans to undergo cataract and other eye operations in Cuba.

This medical diplomacy brings Cuba clout abroad but it causes grumbles at home. Cuba has two and a half times as many doctors per head as the United States. Even so, with so many working abroad, some clinics in Havana are understaffed and others have closed. Drugs and medical equipment are in short supply in the island's hospitals, say the medical students. That is something that Mr Castro's successors may face pressure to redress.

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