

Integration of Medicine and the Community: How the 1984 Family Doctor and Nurse Program in Cuba Transformed Health Care

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Significance

- Ever since the 1959 Cuban Revolution, health care has played a vital political role in Cuban society
- Through the Family Doctor and Nurse Program, Cuba revitalized its primary care system and emphasized preventive medicine
- By defining what it meant to be a family doctor, the government addressed longstanding issues of rural health care
- As the program started just before a period of extreme economic hardship, it showed the medical benefit of community integration amid difficulty

Background

- Pre-1959, Cuba experienced a deep urban—rural health care gap
- Post-1959, the revolutionary government prioritized developing Cuban medicine as a national goal
- In the 1960s, the government sought to improve public health and disease prevention at a local level
- In the 1960s and 1970s, the government developed a preliminary system of larger community clinics throughout Cuba
- Since 1959, medical internationalism has been a central pillar of Cuban medicine

Research and Methods

I accessed archival materials at:

- University of Miami
- Yale University
- New York University
- El Instituto de Historia de Cuba
- El Museo Histórico de las Ciencias Médicas
- La Biblioteca Médica Nacional

I conducted interviews in Havana, Cuba with physicians who worked at:

- Consultorios (medical offices)
- Policlínicos (community clinics)
- Hospitals

Integration of the Program into the Community

- Initial structure: a physician-nurse pair who lived within the 150-person community they were assigned to oversee
- Levels of medical care: consultorios, policlínicos, and hospitals
- These medical offices (**consultorios**) sought to widen accessibility
- Newspaper depictions showcased the idealized physician:
 - Lawton (Havana suburbs) modeled doctors as community neighbors
 - Sierra Maestra (rural mountains) exemplified the great reach of the Cuban medical system and the commitment to rural health
- The incorporation of general internal medicine sought to attract physician trainees and to fight stigma against primary care physicians
- The program sought to incorporate better demographic representation among the family physicians



A family physician traveling to a patient on horseback in the Sierra Maestra



A policlínico in the outskirts of Havana



A consultorio in Lawton with the consultorio on the first floor and the doctor's living space on the second



A consultorio in the outskirts of Havana with the office on the right and the doctor's living space on the left

Resiliency of the Program Amid Two Different Stressors

- The program faced two stressors shortly after its inception:
 - a period of extreme economic hardship caused by embargos (Special Period)
 - a growing focus on medical internationalism (sending doctors abroad)
- As a result of the economic crisis, the health of Cubans severely deteriorated as they faced nutritional difficulties
- The material shortages limited the construction of medical offices
- As physicians were deeply integrated in their communities, they experienced a greater level of burnout because they saw their patients' difficulties firsthand
- Medical internationalism sought to showcase Cuban medical might to the world
- With the increasing demands of internationalism, physicians began to be removed from their posts at consultorios to be sent abroad
- The Cuban physician's characterization as a community member allowed the program to persist



Cuban physicians arriving in Brazil as a part of medical internationalism

Key Takeaways

- The government sought to create an image of a physician who was a neighbor to Cubans, whether in the suburbs of Havana or in the isolated mountains
- Even in the face of hardship, family doctors were still able to remain connected with their patients and continue providing care
- Dueling priorities of a health system dedicated to the community and overseas stressed the physicians and weakened the program
- "If you do not feel the pain of your patient, you will not cure them" - Family doctor in the outskirts of Havana

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