



Cuba's economic reforms prompt debate about health care

Cuba's health-care system has delivered good health indicators but further improvements could depend on how the country's economic reforms play out. Sharmila Devi reports from Havana.

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"My sister has diabetes and other health problems and it can be hard for her to get the drugs she needs", said Jorge, a taxi-driver, as we drove past the Hospital Hermanos Ameijeiras, a 23-storey edifice that dominates Havana's skyline.

The building was supposed to be the National Bank replete with a stock exchange but it was turned into a hospital after the 1959 revolution and it now looks shabby and ill-kept like much of the country's infrastructure.

Although Jorge and most of his compatriots hope that recent economic reforms will bring in much-needed investment as they slowly dilute Cuba's state-controlled economy, they also worry about whether growing inequalities will keep many goods unaffordable or inaccessible.

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The handshake by US President Barack Obama and Cuban President

Raoul Castro at Nelson Mandela's memorial last month boosted hopes yet again of better ties between the two countries. But the 50-year-old US embargo is likely to remain in force for some time and it continues to hamper the Caribbean island's economy overall as well as the import of health-care technology, materials, and active ingredients needed to manufacture pharmaceuticals.

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Doing well

"Looking at the indicators, Cuba is mostly doing well based on its system of primary health care", Jose Luis Di Fabio, the representative in Havana for the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the Americas regional office of WHO, told *The Lancet*.

Cuba has one of the highest doctor-patient ratios in the world at 6.7 doctors per 1000 people, he said. Life expectancy is 78 years, just behind the USA. The infant mortality rate is 4.7 per 1000 livebirths, lower than in America at 5.9.

It has also won plaudits around the world for "medical diplomacy"—medical education and the export of doctors, most recently in large numbers to Brazil, in a programme partly administered by PAHO. More than 3000 foreign medics started work in Brazil in January and by March,

there will be 6600 mostly Cuban doctors working there. Some 40 000 Cuban doctors work around the world but three-quarters are in Venezuela as part of an energy and trade deal.

Brazil pays the Cuban doctors 10% of their US\$4250 monthly salary (the rest goes to the Cuban Government) but that is considerably more than they would earn at home. "The doctors see this as a big salary, they can save money, buy consumer goods to sell, and they earn privileges at home", Julie Feinsilver, an academic and author of *Healing the Masses: Cuban Health Politics at Home and Abroad*, told *The Lancet*. "A Cuban aged 54 years or under was raised under the revolution and doesn't know any other system and they see it as an honour to serve and to learn."

The foundation of Cuba's health system is more than 450 community-based polyclinics that are the hubs of neighbourhood-based, doctor-and-nurse offices. These were reorganised in a reform process starting in the 2000s and the polyclinics offer an average of 20 services such as rehabilitation, clinical laboratories, radiology, ultrasound, and optometry. "The model is very good but then the [US] embargo is taking its toll with the deterioration of equipment, the lapsing of medicines, and the need to procure from other countries", said Di Fabio.

But Cuba could do more to reduce its reliance on some types of technology, which Cubans have got used to, he said. "The population has got used to x-rays, MRIs, and CT scanning and professionals sometimes need to go back to their clinical skills."

Feinsilver says she has long argued that Cubans are "over-medicalised" and this has meant lots of complaints from ordinary Cubans whenever



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Cuba's ageing infrastructure needs major investment, say experts

reforms are enacted. "Between 1984 and 2008, there were family doctors and nurses on practically every block so people became accustomed to that", she said. "They've pulled back from that and I believe justifiably so."

Non-communicable diseases present the biggest health threats to the nation. Cancer, which in 2012 caused one in four deaths in this country of 11.2 million people, has surpassed heart disease as the number one cause of death.

The spectre of communicable diseases, however, still casts a shadow. Di Fabio of PAHO said he was kept informed about outbreaks of cholera and dengue fever and praised the Cuban system for its monitoring and vigilance in such cases. "The system is pretty good and in almost any case of diarrhoea, cholera is suspected and people act accordingly. Cholera stays in the minds of people."

He also pointed to the success of the country's biopharmaceutical sector, which grew out of the need to develop a vaccine-production capability to circumvent the US embargo. Public health efforts were coupled with scientific research and the sector is now a source of substantial foreign earnings. For example, Cuba and Brazil cooperated on production of millions of doses of meningococcal vaccine (A and C) that was prequalified by WHO for the benefit of those in need.

Mutual benefit

Gail Reed, founding director of Medical Education Co-operation with Cuba (MEDICC), a non-profit that develops bridges between US, Cuban, and global health communities, told *The Lancet* that the USA as well as Cuba would benefit enormously if Washington lifted the embargo on two-way trade between the two countries.

She pointed to the drug Heberprot-P that contains epidermal growth factor to treat advanced diabetic foot ulcer. Developed by Cuba and registered in more than 15 other countries, it has

reduced relative risk of amputations in Cuba by 69%, she said. "My personal view is there would be real benefits to the US from better relations, especially in health", said Reed, who wrote what remains the most comprehensive study of the embargo's effect on Cuban health for the American Association for World Health in 1997.

The US embargo is extra-territorial. For example, any ship that docks in Cuba cannot dock in the USA for 6 months. "Look at the size of Cuba: not too many ships choose Cuba over the US", she said.

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Economic transition

Any further improvements in the Cuban health system is tied to economic progress overall. Cuba has begun reforms to the Soviet-style economy and the private sector, mostly small businesses, now accounts for under half a million people or 5% of the labour force.

Travel restrictions on ordinary Cubans have been eased but there has been no change to the one-party, Communist political system.

In the near-term, Cuba's challenges include the management of a burgeoning private sector with the still much larger public sector, such as increasing doctors wages from their average of around \$30 a month compared with those working in tourism who can earn several hundreds of dollars a month.

According to PAHO, Cuba's GDP per head is \$5045 and its public expenditure on health is 10.5% of GDP. Beat Schmid, programme coordinator in Havana for *medicuba Suisse*, a Swiss non-profit that works to support Cuba's health system, told *The Lancet*: "A high level of investment

in health care is very expensive and how they keep it at a high level in an economically poor country is key."

"After 20 years of economic crisis, there is obviously a huge need for infrastructure investments and material resources", he said.

Cuba imports 80% of its food and the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Care International has several agricultural and disaster response projects in the country. In 2012, some 3 million people were affected by Hurricane Sandy, with 226 000 homes damaged along with water distribution networks, health centres, and schools. "Attention was diverted to the eastern seaboard of the US after Sandy but Cuba is still recovering and according to the latest government figures, only 66% of the affected population has been reached in Santiago [de Cuba province]", says Christina Polzot, country representative for Care International in Cuba.

Human rights are still an issue in the country. Political opponents within Cuba are monitored and often harassed while NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are prohibited from working there. "There is a general lack of freedom of expression and the country is tightly controlled", James Burke, campaigner for Amnesty's Caribbean team, told *The Lancet*. Burke said the US embargo was used by the Cuban Government as a pretext to crack down on its own citizens by claiming US intelligence agencies were constantly trying to undermine it by covert means.

Managing the transition to a mixed economy, such as the merging of the dual-currency system and introducing taxes on private sector profits, will require much skill from the Cuban Government. "There are economic disparities and they'll have to be watched carefully", said MEDICC's Gail Reed.

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