

Cuba trains American medical students — to work in US

Eight young Americans have recently taken up President Fidel Castro's offer of a free medical education in Cuba, much to the chagrin of American anti-Castro groups.

Castro hopes that the 8 students, all from low-income, minority families and communities where health care is in short supply, will be the vanguard of a corps of up to 500 US students taking advantage of Cuba's willingness to train doctors to treat poor Americans. The next 30 students from the US will arrive this summer.

The offer originated last year after Castro met with the US Congressional Black Caucus. Benny Thompson, a Democrat from Mississippi, complained of the high infant mortality rate and lack of doctors in his district.

Castro responded by offering to educate students from low-income American families who agreed to return to their communities after the 6 years of training. Cuba is paying all costs save for the students' airfare.

The Americans won't be alone in Cuba. More than 3400 medical students from 23 Latin American, African and Caribbean countries are already being trained at Cuba's expense. After intensive Spanish-language training, since all courses are taught in Spanish, the students spend their first 2 years at the Latin American School of Medical Sciences in Havana and then move on to 1 of Cuba's 21 other schools.

Joe Garcia of the Cuban American National Foundation doubts that the students will ever be licensed to practise in the US, but a spokesperson for the Florida Board of Medicine told *CMAJ* that they would be considered for licensure as international medical graduates. A spokesperson for the National Federation of State Medical Boards said they would be eligible for licensure as long as they meet state medical board requirements.

Physicians are one of Cuba's prime exports. A country of 11 million people, it has 60 000 doctors — roughly the

same number as Canada, which has 3 times the population. Many are assigned to developing countries. In Haiti alone, 800 Cuban MDs are doing community outreach work.

After Hurricane Mitch in 1998, more than 120 Cuban doctors were sent to Honduras, where they have since treated 1.2 million patients. In Uganda, Cuban doctors have created a highly respected AIDS-prevention program that the UN considers a model.

Dr. Anthony Kirkpatrick, a professor of anesthesiology at the University of South Florida who advocates freer relations between the US and Cuba, says he would not hesitate to work with a doctor educated there.

He says that even though Cuba is one of the poorest countries in this hemisphere, it has developed model public health and child vaccination programs and has successfully curtailed the spread of HIV that is ravaging many other Caribbean and Latin American countries.

Kirkpatrick, who has flown many medical supplies to Cuba, says American students trained there will learn how to get the best outcomes with the fewest resources — something they would not be taught at an American medical school. He says Cuba's centralized system of primary care outreach services is ideal for it and the country has "simply built a better mousetrap." — *Milan Korcok*, Florida

Canadian MDs oppose US missile shield plan

The proposed US national missile defence program — "the missile shield" — could escalate into another nuclear arms race, Physicians for Global Survival warns. The 5000-member Canadian group has joined 19 other member organizations of the Canadian Network to Abolish Nuclear Weapons in condemning the initiative. The shield is supposed to protect the US from missile attacks by "rogue" states such as North Korea, Iraq and Iran, and from accidental missile launches. Russia and China consider it an offensive, not defensive, system; China has declared that it will respond in kind if the system is built.

Dr. Neil Arya, the president of Physicians for Global Survival, says the unilateral approach to security by the US flies in the face of the current international framework of nonproliferation of weapons, arms control and disarmament agreements. In particular, he says that it violates the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty.

If and when the US launches the US\$60- to \$100-billion program, Canada will likely be invited to participate because of its partnership in the North American Aerospace Defence Command. Rather than waiting for that request, the Canadian network is lobbying MPs to oppose the missile shield. "Canadians have to let our politicians know what we think," says Arya, who calls the shield proposal "ludicrous." — *Barbara Sibbald*, *CMAJ*



A US protestor urges President Bush to scrap the national missile defence program