

Doctors don't buy 'stress' story

U.S. experts said Cuba isn't telling the truth about the causes of Castro's medical problems. Several doctors said a bleeding ulcer was most likely.

The Miami Herald
Aug. 02, 2006

Cuba's official explanation that stress caused Fidel Castro's intestinal bleeding is flat-out wrong, medical experts said Tuesday.

"Stress is not playing a role here as far as I'm concerned," said Jeffrey B. Raskin, the University of Miami's interim chief of gastroenterology.

Seven gastroenterologists from South Florida and around the country said they didn't accept the explanation in the purported letter from Castro, released Monday night, that said weeks of hard work and travel created "extreme stress" that "provoked an acute intestinal crisis, with sustained bleeding, that obliged me to face a complicated surgical operation."

Experts said stress might exacerbate an existing medical problem but wouldn't by itself cause "sustained bleeding."

All the gastroenterologists interviewed said the statement did not include enough information to determine the cause of the bleeding.

"That's as vague as you could ask for," Anthony Kalloo, chief of gastroenterology at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, said of the statement.

On Tuesday night, the situation became even more vague when a message from Castro was read on state television in which he allegedly said the condition of his health had become "a state secret."

Still, experts say Castro's age -- he will be 80 in two weeks -- makes any complicated surgery problematic.

RISKS OF SURGERY

Sang Lee, a colorectal surgeon at Weill Cornell Medical School, said complications from the surgery might be more risky than the underlying condition. "You're worried about bleeding from the surgery itself. You can have an infection at the site where you make the incision. You can . . . have a heart attack."

Jamie Barkin, chief of gastroenterology at Mount Sinai Medical Center, noted the word "complicated" in the official statement describing the surgery, because most gastroenterological work is fairly straightforward. "Either that's a publicist's word or there's something wrong with him that's really bad," said Barkin. "They could be hiding something more serious . . . It could be anything from inflammation to a tumor."

With what little they did know, several doctors speculated that the most likely cause was a bleeding ulcer. That condition is usually treated with drugs and endoscopy, in which a tube is snaked into the intestinal tract to stem the bleeding by cauterizing, or burning, the wound until it closes.

Complicated surgery, such as Castro apparently required, would mean the bleeding was so serious it couldn't be stopped by less invasive means.

Peter Kelsey, a Harvard gastroenterologist, said bleeding peptic ulcers -- lesions in the stomach or the top part of the small intestine -- are the most common cause of "high-volume, life-threatening" intestinal bleeding.

Most ulcers are caused by some combination of a bacterial infection and the use of painkillers such as aspirin and ibuprofen, Kelsey said.

Alfredo Rabassa, a South Miami gastroenterologist, speculated Castro might well have been given such drugs after he broke two bones in a 2004 fall, but the drugs alone would not usually cause an ulcer serious enough to need surgery.

Whatever the cause, the long-held belief that stress causes ulcers has been dismissed by scientists.

"That's basically a myth," said Raymond Sandler, chairman of gastroenterology at the Cleveland Clinic in Weston.

The stress explanation could simply be a coverup, said Andy Gomez, a senior fellow at the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies. He believes it is "absolutely likely" that the Cuban government is hiding details about Castro's condition.

"For over four decades, the government has been very careful about making any statements about Fidel's or Raúl's health," Gomez said. "For the first time, they've made a break with that tradition. That means we're dealing with something out of the ordinary."

WHAT AILMENT COULD BE

Experts said the bleeding could be caused by a range of ailments and rooted anywhere from the esophagus to the rectum. In addition to an ulcer, they named several possibilities:

- **Diverticulosis (diverticular disease):** small pouches that hang from the colon. They sometimes cause bleeding, and on rare occasions enough to require surgery.
- **Colon cancer:** can sometimes cause bleeding, but the bleeding is usually limited.
- **Mesenteric ischemia:** A blockage of blood flow to the intestines, leaving dead tissue, which then sloughs off, oozes and bleeds.
- **Varices:** Dilated blood vessels, typically in the esophagus, that can rupture or bleed. Usually caused by cirrhosis or other liver disease.
- **AVM (arteriovenous malformations):** Abnormalities in the connections between veins and arteries that can lead to bleeding, particularly in the elderly.

Charles Gerson, of the Mount Sinai school of medicine in New York, said, "Unless he has colon cancer that's spread, all of it is treatable."

In the official explanation given Monday night, Castro's letter said his trip to Argentina and work commemorating the anniversary of the assault on the Moncada barracks involved "days and nights of continuous work, barely able to sleep, my health, which has withstood all trials, was subjected to extreme stress and broke down."

“This provoked an acute intestinal crisis, with sustained bleeding, that obliged me to face a complicated surgical operation. All details of this health accident are evident in the X-rays, endoscopies and filmed materials. The operation obliges me to spend several weeks in repose.”

Castro's health problems have become the subject of intense discussion in recent years. In June 2001, he fainted after speaking for two hours in Havana. In 2003, he almost collapsed during the inauguration of Argentine President Néstor Kirchner. In 2004, Castro fell after making a speech and broke his right arm and left knee.

Several experts on Tuesday wondered whether his present bleeding might somehow be related to cancer, perhaps caused by cigar smoking, but Castro has said that he quit cigars in the mid-1980s for “reasons of health.”