

Both Cuba, Venezuela reap benefits from medical program

An oil-for-doctors partnership between Cuba and Venezuela has provided free eye surgery to hundreds of thousands -- and a steady flow of oil and cash to Cuba.

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HAVANA - Roberto Andrade sat in a hospital waiting room beside rows of patients, each with a bandage on one eye, and explained why he considers himself a diplomat of sorts.

The Salvadoran bus driver had cataract surgery on both eyes, courtesy of the Cuban and Venezuelan governments.

"In my country, a surgery like that costs \$8,000," Andrade said. "I make \$12 a day. I would never, ever, be able to save that much. Now I am an ambassador: I go around El Salvador telling everyone how well I was treated."

Andrade, 56, is one of nearly half a million people -- most of them Venezuelans -- to undergo eye surgery in Cuba in the past two years. He also represents the latest boom in Cuba's growing economy: a medical service industry that treats low-income people from around Latin America.

Although the financial details of the program are not known, Operation Miracle is part of a broader oil-for-doctors program that experts say is helping funnel some \$2 billion in Venezuelan subsidies a year to Cuba. President Hugo Chávez's oil-rich government is delivering 90,000 barrels of oil a day, and Cuba in turn provides medical services.

It's a good deal for both nations: While the Cuban doctors' work boosts Havana's coffers, both Cuba and Venezuela strengthen their images for solidarity with the poor.

Chief among the Cuban medical services: cataract surgery.

Last month, the Cuban government announced that 300,000 Venezuelans and 100,000 people from 28 other nations have been treated so far. The majority are flown to Havana on Cuban airliners and put up for two weeks at resort hotels, courtesy of Chávez.

Fleets of new Chinese buses carry the patients between hospitals and hotels -- a source of bitterness among some Cubans, who have to wait hours for decrepit mass transit while foreigners enjoy air-conditioned comfort.

But for Cuba, the benefits are plenty. Cuba not only gets Venezuela's oil, but also gets paid for providing the services and lodging, experts say.

"I have paid for nothing, not even a cup of coffee," said Franklin Urdaneta, a Venezuelan whose 16-year-old daughter, Yecenia del Carmen, recently had a sagging eyelid lifted by the Cuban doctors. "I'm very grateful."

The Urdanetas were put up for 19 days while Yecenia had preoperative office visits, he said. He added that the patients received everything free of charge, no matter their politics.

"This surgery is not just for *Chavistas*," he said, referring to the president's supporters. "It's for people who need it. I have even seen . . . patients with \$600 cellphones."

This month, Operation Miracle will spread to Africa and Asia, its directors have said. Soon, the program expects to serve at least one million patients a year.

And now, in addition to 13 ophthalmologic centers in Venezuela, clinics have opened in Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras and Bolivia.

The eye surgeries also are available to Cubans, and the government has launched an outreach program to find and test citizens with potential eye problems.

But the round-the-clock surgeries are not without their detractors.

As the program has spread abroad, complaints have followed. In Uruguay, the doctors' association sued, saying the Cuban doctors are not licensed to practice in that country. Some Jamaican patients reported their vision worsened.

NURSE'S CRITICISMS

A nurse in the program told The Chicago Tribune last year that the quality of the surgeries was suffering in the pursuit of speed, and that important preoperative tests were often skipped.

Despite those objections, the program, designed to help patients who can't pay for private healthcare and don't have insurance, is widely considered a triumph for both nations.

"It's a no-brainer in that it's enormously successful, enormously profitable and enormously politically successful for Cuba and Venezuela," said Hans de Salas-del Valle, a research associate at the University of Miami's Cuba Transition Project. "This is part of a broader scheme that enables Chávez to funnel more funding to Cuba, and Chávez also reaps the political reward."

Even if some surgeries didn't go perfectly, de Salas-del Valle said, the program should be judged in the context that most of the low-income patients would never have had the surgery otherwise.

EYE DOCTORS GALORE

Havana officials have boasted that the Cuban Ophthalmology Institute alone has 62 doctors and dozens of residents. The island, they say, now has more than 800 eye doctors, compared with 117 before the revolution -- only 37 of whom stayed in the country after Fidel Castro took power in 1959.

More than 220,000 Cuban doctors, nurses and other medical personnel worked abroad from 1963 to 2004, and another 100,000 are being trained for service in the Third World, the government has said.

The eye surgeries, however, mark the first time that hundreds of thousands of patients are flying to Cuba for treatment.

"Cuba has for years used its strength in medical services as an instrument in foreign policy," said William LeoGrande, a professor at American University. "It's not the Peace Corps, but it's the same idea. In fact, it is exactly the same: sending people abroad to sow goodwill."

The Miami Herald withheld the name of the correspondent who filed this report because the author lacked the Cuban journalist visa required to work on the island.