

## The truth about Cuban doctors in Venezuela and elsewhere

By Tom Whitney

A New York Times [front page article](#) on March 17 had little good to say about Cuban doctors working in Venezuela. The claim is that rather than care for patients, they are going door to door seeking votes for candidates of President Nicolas Maduro's United Socialist Party of Venezuela. Supposedly they withhold treatment from patients who oppose Maduro. The story builds on interviews with 16 Cuban doctors, one now living in Chile.

Beginning in 1963, Cuba extended health care and medical education to the far reaches of the world. Cuba's health-care outreach to Venezuela, from 2003 on, took on an outsized role within the larger initiative. The dark view of The New York Times is at odds with a credible and durable narrative of exemplary international solidarity on the part of Cuban doctors.

The basis for their serving in Venezuela was an exchange arrangement. Cuba would provide Venezuela with physicians who teach medical students and provide health care. In return, Venezuela would guarantee Cuba availability of low priced oil. By 2008, [almost 30,000](#) Cuban health workers, including 13,000 physicians, were providing care in Venezuela.

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The Venezuelan government of President Hugo Chavez established its Barrio Adentro (“inside the neighborhood”) program to expand health services to millions of previously underserved Venezuelans. Cuban doctors were crucial to the program's success.

Evidence shows that Cuba's medical solidarity on an international scale adds up to a remarkable revolutionary achievement. As of 2016, according to one report, [“325,000 Cuban health personnel](#) [had] provided services in 158 countries. There are currently 55,000 Cubans working in 67 countries, including more than 25,000 doctors.”

Notably, 1500 Cuban doctors cared for survivors of a terrible earthquake in Pakistan in 2005. Cuba has provided millions of poorly sighted people in many counties with free eye-surgery, maintained a strong medical presence in Haiti, and sent doctors to West Africa to care for Ebola victims.

But, as suggested by The New York Times, all may not be well with Cuban doctors in Venezuela - and by implication, elsewhere. A recent report alleging that thousands of Cuban [military personnel](#) are operating in Venezuela may inflate the Times story. The

“thousands” of Cubans who do work in Venezuela are the Cuban doctors. So the opportunity exists for imagining a military aspect of their involvement there.

Such stories appear in the context of U.S. efforts to destabilize and remove Venezuela’s socialist government. News stories and editorials of the Times follow the line of U.S. government propaganda claiming that a corrupt and oppressive socialist government is responsible for Venezuela’s troubles.

Even so, the message of this Times report on 16 Cuban doctors is believable, although over the years many mainstream media critiques of Cuba’s medical involvement in Venezuela have been flawed. A few Cuban doctors working in Venezuela – of thousands that are there - may indeed have strayed from basic principles of delivering health care abroad.

A contributing factor would have been the difficult living conditions Cuban doctors often experience on such missions abroad. And their pay is low, thanks to Cuba’s overall economic problems, which are due in part to the U.S. economic blockade. In recent years Cuba’s government has realized income by charging nations for health care provided by Cubans. The arrangements call for the doctors working overseas to receive only part of the income they generate. The government retains most of it.

The situation is such that Cuban doctors working overseas are vulnerable. Help may be offered, perhaps with pressure, in return for favors; to resist may not be easy. Earlier media reports critical of the Cuban participation in Venezuelan health care, and often hinting at political motivations, have already highlighted problematic living and working conditions.

In fact, the U.S. government is used to exploiting dissatisfaction among Cuban doctors posted abroad. The purpose of its Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program,” in force from 2006 until 2017, was to undermine Cuba’s overseas medical programs by encouraging doctors to leave their posts and move to the United States.

Cuban doctors themselves have weighed in. Jetzael Portilla, serving in Miranda state, Venezuela insisted that, “Barrio Adentro does not distinguish in political affiliation or social stratum; on the contrary, it concentrates on the human[e] treatment of patients.”

A statement from a Cuban Medical Brigade in Gambia testified to a huge measure of idealism. It begins: “Imperialist gentlemen: you don’t know what it is to be internationalist. That’s why we say, as our Commander in Chief said to us: ‘To be internationalists is to pay our debt with humanity.’”

And, “You have to learn from Cuba and from the Cuban collaborators you find in different parts of the world that it’s better to extend a hand and offer help and not invest millions of dollars in weapons of war the way you are used to doing ... Cuban medicine over the course of all these years is known to have gained the highest prestige at the international level. That’s because we are capable of being in solidarity selflessly and disposed always to give our lives for the sake of saving others.”