

MEDICC Review

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New Nursing School Opens in Havana

By Anna Kovac



November 20, 2006 -- Dean Deisy Verdalles, with 30 years of teaching experience in nursing, told *Cuba Health Reports* the new nursing school was founded because "scientific expertise is what is needed today." The Manolito Aguiar Institute, in the heavy-populated Marianao neighborhood, is almost completely refurbished and will soon welcome 2,000 students from Havana.

The new school is part of Havana's Higher Institute of Medical Sciences and will serve as a reference center for all nursing faculties on the island. [1] According to Verdalles, it is one step in a process that aims to consolidate nursing education programs in the country and improve the quality of care. Nurses are now trained within Cuba's medical sciences universities (termed 'institutes'), where medicine constitutes one faculty, nursing another, and the university-level health professions another still.

The most urgent task following the revolution in 1959 – when half the doctors left the island for the United States and universal medical care became a public health strategy – was training qualified health personnel. This also meant furthering the skills of those already working in the health professions. To staff the hospitals and polyclinics opening all over the country for example, midwives trained to be nurse's aides and in turn, aides trained to be nurses.

Later, nursing courses were offered in intensive care, pediatrics and other specialties. With the idea of continually upgrading the field of nursing, a five-year university degree in Nursing was established in 1976.

Continuing the initiative, careers in community and mother-child nursing were introduced in 1989, and a Masters of Science in Nursing was first offered in 1998. Before that, many nurses – like Verdalles herself – had earned their MS in related fields, including medical pedagogy and epidemiology.



Maricela Torres

Three years ago, in cooperation with the University of Manitoba, Canada, the Cuban Higher Institute of Medical Sciences established a doctoral nursing program. The first graduate – Maricela Torres – earned her PhD this year, and there are several more candidates in the pipeline.

Torres' career almost parallels the development of nursing education in Cuba, attempting to respond to staffing needs at each juncture, while addressing the long-term goal of excellence. Torres started off as a technical-level nurse (LPN-equivalent in US terms), specialized in pediatrics, and began teaching early because of her excellent grades. She continued studying, earning her university degree in nursing and working as a community nurse before going back to study for her Masters degree and finally her doctorate. She says her doctoral thesis, analyzing and detailing the roles and competencies of different categories of nurses, helped establish fairer salaries.

The Manolito Aguiar Institute is a response to the growing enrollment in nursing education in Cuba. Since 2004, nursing enrollment has almost doubled on the island, increasing from 18,663 to 35,483 for the academic year 2006-2007.[2] Training qualified nurses is critical not just for Cuba, but the entire region, where brain drain and lack of opportunity have created severe nursing shortages.[3]

Just as the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM according to its Spanish acronym) trains students from around the world, so does the School of Nursing in Jaguey Grande in Matanzas Province, where nursing students from St Vincent and the Grenadines, Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts & Nevis are on scholarship. A new school in Dominica, made possible by an agreement between the two island nation's health ministries, now enrolls 89 students. Another nursing school established with Cuban cooperation is slated to open in Belize.

Maricela Torres, a full professor now, told *Cuba Health Reports* that what is particular about the Cuban nursing curriculum – like Medicine – is that theory and practice work alongside one another. From the first year on, students get on-the-job experience.

Torres stressed that “nurses work together with doctors and technicians in a team. They often study together with other health workers for their Masters’ in various specialties at the School of Public Health.” She pointed out that in Cuba, nurses are heads of polyclinics, maternity homes and other institutions.

“It was not a calling,” Torres confessed, when asked why she became a nurse. “I started studying nursing to study something.” But caring for children convinced her nursing meant much more. “I love everything in the nursing profession from teaching, research, working in the community, and most of all practice.” Adds Torres: “nursing is care –physical, mental and spiritual care... it’s prevention, it’s health promotion, it’s putting your skills to work for every patient.” Achieving and maintaining excellence in all these areas is the goal of the new Manolito Aguiar Institute. ■

Notes & References

1. There are currently four nursing schools in Cuba, in Havana City, Villa Clara, Camagüey and Santiago de Cuba provinces.
2. National School of Public Health, 2006.
3. According to the World Health Organization (2004), the nurse to patient ratio for the Americas region is 414 to 100,000 patients. In Cuba, there are 795 nurses for 100,000 patients (Anuario Estadístico, 2005).
4. As of June 2006, there were 28,664 Cuban health professionals working overseas in 68 countries (MINREX, 2006).

Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba

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