

Cuba Health News

Havana's Hospital Nacional Receives Overdue Overhaul

By **Conner Gorry**

February 5, 2007 -- A nationwide program to refurbish, renovate, and upgrade 52 Cuban hospitals is bearing fruit, most recently in Havana, where the Hospital Nacional has recently completed a two-year project. Previously an example of a Cuban hospital that had fallen into egregious disrepair, today Hospital Nacional offers state-of-the-art services in pleasant, professional surroundings.



This is good news for staff and patients of the teaching hospital and national reference center, who had tolerated for some time crumbling walls and other decay reminiscent of the Malecón, Havana's seaside promenade. "It was depressing and dreadful before," opined one patient as she was released after an overnight stay. "The X-ray room was dark and dank. The walls were moldy. It was horrible." Not to mention that for years, the hospital only had one X-ray machine.

Such conditions are a thing of the past, however, as the hospital has undergone a complete overhaul at a cost of more than US\$6.7 million, over US\$5 million of which went to technology purchases.[1] The massive project almost completely remodeled the hospital and added 55 new services, bringing patient services to 87 today. Additionally, the revamp incorporates an integrative approach to health and well-being emphasizing good food, art, and nature through better hospital meals, murals and sculptures throughout the various buildings and wards, fountains, and an abundance of tropical plants.

"The hospital is very nice now," said the same overnight patient. "Most important, the medical ethics are there, the humane treatment of patients by the doctors is there. That's what counts above all."

In the pre-delivery room, another woman, huge with child, laughed when asked how her pregnancy at this improved Hospital Nacional compared to the old one, where she first gave birth 11 years ago. "It's so different, so much better. There's even air conditioning."



The Bottom Line

Along with cooler air, there are also improved indicators, particularly in maternal health. According to Dr Sullyeng Yee, Vice Director for Education & Research, Hospital Nacional (which on average has 16 births per day), had some of the lowest infant and maternal mortality rates in Havana City for 2006.[2] She attributes the low rates to a variety of factors including fewer maternity beds per room; reinforced preventive and educational measures aimed at mothers-to-be, especially those at risk; the hospital's specialized care as a National Maternal-Child Health and hematology reference center; and the quality of the renovation, particularly the intensive care unit.



"I have worked at this hospital for 23 years and I'm impressed by the renovation and how quickly it was done...there was a time when things were pretty bad here," Dr Yee told *Cuba Health Reports*. "But throughout [the remodeling], the hospital never stopped working; we never stopped treating people, which wasn't always easy."

In an exclusive interview with *Cuba Health Reports*, hospital Director Dr Antonio Vargas González concurred, saying "keeping the hospital open during construction while maintaining indicators was the hardest part." But he also underscored the importance of continuing services, given the size of the hospital's catchment area: Hospital Nacional is the reference center for five municipalities in Havana City province, with 440 beds for a total population of 337,123. Remaining operative also provided impetus for supervisors and construction crews to maintain the renovation schedule – a significant challenge during large, ongoing projects such as this one.

In order to promote punctual and high quality work, Hospital Nacional instituted several innovations that might be replicated at other Cuban hospital renovation projects. Chief among these was the designation of a foreman (or woman) to oversee and coordinate the construction in their specialty area so that the same doctors and specialists that ultimately would be working in the area participated in its construction and/or overhaul.

The 'foreman specialists' provided oversight and necessary design parameters from the start, which Dr Yee believes was key to the renovation's success: "it's just like when you're having work done on your house. It's *always* better to have someone there, keeping an eye on the progress and communicating how you want things done."

This means that physicist Dr Teresa Fundora helped with the design of the new Nuclear Medicine department at the hospital, while her colleagues did the same for the 55 other new services installed, including nephrology, cytogenetics, minimum access surgery like endoscopy and laparoscopy, and importantly, mammography. Before the renovation, patients requiring these services were referred to other hospitals sprinkled around Havana, which was not ideal given the city's deplorable transportation situation.



The Technological Challenge

Equipping the new departments provided a formidable challenge, given the US embargo of Cuba and the Draconian restrictions it places on technological acquisitions by Cuban entities.[3] As a result, the state-of-the-art equipment now in use at the hospital is reminiscent of a United Nations summit, with many countries represented (and the US conspicuously absent).

There is computer tomography (CT) equipment from Japan, a Gamma camera from Canada, and French and German technology throughout the 22 operating rooms and other services. Speaking of the UN, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) also donated an image enlarger used in the Nuclear Medicine department, which has been certified to enforce international nuclear security standards, including quality control and radiation regulation.

Attaining the technology was a challenge that gave way to another: training specialists to use that technology. There is a two-pronged strategy to effectively and efficiently train Cubans to use such state-of-the-art equipment. First, as is customary in other countries, the manufacturing companies send technicians to Cuba to train local specialists on-site on the equipment model to be installed. Second, specialists from the Hospital Nacional train other specialists from around the island on the use of that same equipment. This pedagogical and training approach dovetails well with the hospital's teaching role, since 231 doctors, more than 200 nurses, and some 400 allied health technicians in 13 specialties are being trained here.



Human resource development has long been a cornerstone of the Cuban public health system. Says Director Vargas: "the best investment we can make, and have made, is in human resources. With quality health professionals, you can increase life expectancy and improve the quality of life for this community, paying quality attention to their specific health needs."

The Maintenance Challenge

Recognizing weaknesses is also on the docket, as the hospital strives to provide training and development for all their staff, not just doctors, nurses and technicians. One severe failing of many Cuban hospitals has been the low level of maintenance and cleanliness in high traffic and common areas. In this, Hospital Nacional also has room for improvement. On one busy morning, detritus was strewn about the emergency room lobby and garbage pails in the intake ward were overflowing.

While this may have been simply the aftermath of a particularly hectic morning of intakes and crises, Dr Yee admits that maintaining order and cleanliness is an ongoing challenge due to lack of training and staff (there are only 59 people on the entire hospital cleaning crew). To address the training challenge, the hospital has begun offering 50-hour short courses to cleaning staff to improve their efficiency and proficiency. To date, 90% of cleaning staff have completed the 50-hour segment entitled Integrated Course for Excellence. Still, the public has a concomitant responsibility in keeping the hospital clean, which is not always assumed; administrators hope that working together, cleaning crew, staff, and the public can keep the nice, new hospital looking that way.

Maintaining the cutting edge technology once it has been in use for a period of time is another consideration, though Cuba has a long history of training technicians and biomedical engineers. Indeed, Cubans around the world (the country currently has 30,000 health professionals volunteering in 69 countries) are renowned for their knack for fixing broken equipment.

Keeping the hospital clean, the technology working, the patients satisfied and the health professionals motivated, won't be easy. But, the motto of the Hospital Nacional since its founding in 1961 has been 'making dreams come true.' Says Director Vargas: "the dream of this hospital is to provide equitable health for all, to improve health for everyone." The renovation has brought that dream one step closer to reality.

Notes & References

1. Final construction report, Hospital Nacional Enrique Cabrera.

2. The 2006 infant mortality rate at Hospital Nacional was 1.4 per 1,000 live births, the lowest in the hospital's history. For more on 2006 infant mortality rates in Cuba, see *Cuba Health Report* article [here](#).
3. According to the Office of Foreign Asset Control of the US Treasury Department, no equipment containing 10% or more of US-produced components can be sold to Cuba; this has serious effects on the health and medical technology that Cuba can purchase on the international market.

All photos courtesy of Hospital Nacional archives.

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Last updated: 02/01/07