

Cuba crisis to hit NHI

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Pietermaritzburg - The actions of the Cuban medical students accused of evangelising on street corners in the island state could affect the rollout of the National Health Insurance.

Leading medical health academics have said that while educating South African medical students in Cuba is “not ideal”, SA needs to vastly increase the number of doctors working in the country in order for the NHI to work.

Earlier this month *The Witness* reported that Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo announced he would travel to Cuba to “engage with KZN students adversely affected by a religious sect”.

The “sect” being referred to was allegedly the work of Pietermaritzburg pastor Apostle Siphon Maduna from the Threshing Floors Bible Church.

Maduna was accused of preaching to the students, taking them away from studying and instead committing them to seven hours of prayer and ministering to Cuban locals a day.

According to the Health Department, one student had become “mentally disturbed” as a result of the sermons.

The church has also been blamed for the students’ high failure rate. The Health Department said 26 KZN students had failed their academic year and a further 22 faced exclusion due to being absent for more than 20% of class attendance days. The church has denied all the allegations, claiming it is being used as a “scapegoat”.

Dhlomo, who returned from Cuba last week, told *The Witness* via SMS that a report would need to be tabled before the provincial executive before he could make a statement.

South African Medical Association (Sama) vice chairperson Dr Mark Sonderup said the medical programme in Cuba was complex. “It is not sustainable in the long run. In the future, we would need to look at training medical students in South Africa or at other SADC institutions. The patient profile in Botswana and Zimbabwe is similar to what we have here,” said Sonderup.

He said the disease profile in Cuba was vastly different to that in South Africa. Cuba had almost no HIV/Aids patients and focused on preventative healthcare whereas SA dealt with management of disease. Up to 80% of the illnesses of all patients seeking care in South Africa were HIV-related.

Dr Yusuf Veriava, who has advised the state for several years on medical issues and has been involved in the RSA/Cuba medical programme, now known as the Nelson Mandela/Fidel Castro Medical Collaboration, said the programme was a “stop-gap” needed for South Africa to reach its “primary health goals” as envisaged by the NHI.

“By 2018 South Africa should have between 800 and 1 000 new doctors who were trained in Cuba working across the country. Our issue is that we are short of doctors. For us to meet the goals of the national health insurance, more doctors are needed,” said Veriava.

In 2013 the *South African Medical Journal* reported the Cuban programme would produce 1 000 undergraduates annually from 2018. Cuba currently produces 11 000 graduates annually, compared to SA’s approximately 1 300. South Africa currently has nearly 900 students studying medicine in Cuba.

By Jonathan Erasmus, The Witness