Cuba's Medical History Stars in Popular Walking Tour

Text & Photos by Gloria Giraldo, MPH

August 6, 2007 -- In disbelief, organizers of Rutas y Andares (Routes and Pathways, thematic walking tours through Old Havana) divided the crowd of over 100 people who showed up one recent swelteringly hot morning in the Plaza de Armas to take a guided tour of the history of Cuban medicine. Staff indicated that the unprecedented turnout made it one of the best attended tours to date in the popular family-oriented walking excursions, which cost five Cuban pesos (about USD$0.20) per person. The multi-generational crowd included people from all walks of life: doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and health sciences students, in addition to housewives, accountants, architectural buffs, and other locals.

The walking tour, organized by Havana’s Oficina del Historiador (Historian’s Office), started at the Palacio del Segundo Cabo where the wife of a Spanish Vice-Governor had the first cesarean section ever performed in Cuba, in 1825. Many such historical factoids were showered upon the captivated ‘medical tourists:’ the very first document ever printed on the island was a medicine price list from the early 1700s issued by the Real Tribunal de Protomedicato, Cuba’s first public health administration authority from 1711 to 1833; the Real Tribunal was also the first entity to issue medical licenses and administer a medical examination.

The animated crowd listened attentively to the colorful stories interpreted by specialist guide Gerardo Gonzales such as the one about the first woman physician who came to Cuba from Spain, Dr Enriquetta, who had to hide her gender in order to practice medicine. She became known as Dr Enrique, but her true identity was eventually revealed and she was punished by Bishop Espada. In 1879, the first Cuban woman trained in medicine in Cuba was Laura Martinez Carvajal, who suffered acute alienation from her fellow doctors but later was permitted to work at the Belen Convalescent Home for destitute patients.

An obligatory stop was made at the birthplace of Dr Tomas Romay, considered one of the fathers of Cuban medicine, where the guide explained the importance of Dr Romay’s lifework: he introduced vaccines to Cuba and in 1804 tested the smallpox vaccine on his own children, thereby proving its effectiveness and easing the citizenry’s doubts and fears about the vaccination; the population was soon immunized.
The group crisscrossed Old Havana, eliciting surprise among locals upon seeing a crowd of Cubans exploring streets commonly filled by foreign tourists. The walk continued to the site of the very first hospital on the island, San Juan de Dios and the revered pharmacy, La Reunión, with its beautiful, eclectic interior décor. Founded in 1853, La Reunión was the first pharmacy in Cuba and considered the second most important pharmacy in the world at the time.

The tour ended at the Academia de las Ciencias Carlos J. Finlay, the world-renowned scientist whose theory of vector transmission (based on the discovery that the *aedes aegypti* mosquito transmits yellow fever) revolutionized medicine. Dr Finlay is revered for his lifetime dedication to science and is regarded as having saved countless lives through his discovery. For these reasons, Cuba’s internationally-renowned center for research and vaccine development, (including the meningitis B vaccine VA-MENGOC-BC), is named the Finlay Institute.

At the end of the tour, the hot and exhausted crowd received refreshments and praised Gonzales for a wonderful tour, requesting a repeat performance.

For more information:

**Rutas y Andares**
[http://www.habananuestra.cu/page.asp?item=%7B70C1CF8D-E6B3-406B-9506-AFE49A683DAF%7D](http://www.habananuestra.cu/page.asp?item=%7B70C1CF8D-E6B3-406B-9506-AFE49A683DAF%7D)

**Oficina del Historiador de la Habana**
[www.habananuestra.cu](http://www.habananuestra.cu)

**Finlay Institute**
[www.finlay.edu.cu](http://www.finlay.edu.cu)