Documentary Offers Rare Glimpse into Cuban Medical Cooperation

By Conner Gorry

December 12, 2006 – Scientists, educators, health professionals, students and others motivated to improve global health and learn about Cuba's contribution packed Harvard University's Science Center recently for a preview screening of ¡Salud!. This is the first time the complex story of the island's medical cooperation program has been available to audiences worldwide.

Presiding over the event and the lively Q&A were Dr Paul Farmer of Partners in Health and Dr William C Keck, Executive Producer of the film. Director Connie Field was also in attendance. "It's extremely gratifying to get this kind of incredible response to a project you've spent three years of your life dedicated to," she said after receiving an extended standing ovation.

Why All the Fuss?

Quietly and consistently, Cuban medical professionals have been bringing health to some of the poorest, most remote and neglected parts of the world since 1963. In that year, the island nation sent its first medical team to Algeria and has been volunteering in public health systems since in an innovative program based on the approach that has made Cubans some of the world's healthiest people: universal access to health care melded with health promotion, prevention, education, and training.

There are currently close to 30,000 Cuban doctors, nurses and health technicians working in 69 countries around the world, from Argentina to Zimbabwe. Their mission is simple: offer free, quality health care to the poor, wherever they may be. In a world where 1,800 children contract HIV every day[1] and every minute a woman dies from pregnancy- and childbirth-related causes[2], that mission is writ large in this documentary.

"¡Salud! brings forward the most salient issues in global health today and successfully reveals that the right to health is urgent and inescapable," said Dr Arachu Castro of Harvard Medical School after the recent screening.

Topping the list of those issues is brain drain and the global crisis in human resources for health, which form a central and unique part of the documentary, as Cuba, in cooperation with regional partners, aims to train 100,000 doctors for the developing world in the next decade. ¡Salud! offers an intimate portrait of Havana's Latin American Medical School (ELAM), including exclusive interviews with students from the United States studying there. According to Farmer, "Cuba's Latin American Medical School is an old naval academy...[which] is the most dramatic example of turning swords into ploughshares I've seen."

The 90-minute documentary – exquisitely photographed by cinematographer Vicente Franco – was filmed entirely on location in Cuba, Venezuela, Honduras, The Gambia and South Africa. The Cuban health professionals working in these countries, politicians, health policymakers in Cuba and their international partners, and the future doctors being trained in Cuba featured in ¡Salud! provide powerful evidence that "health for all" is indeed possible. Audiences are challenged to do their part to make it happen.

To learn more, and obtain the film for your classroom, organization, convention or church: visit www.saludthefilm.net.

Notes & References
