



Testimony of Bob Schwartz, Vice President, Global Health Partners  
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(1) The United Nations Human Rights Council evaluates countries, in part, by their commitment to protect and guarantee to their citizens “the human right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.” Based on my experience over the past 29 years of direct engagement with the Cuban healthcare system, in my capacity as Vice President of Global Health Partners, a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization, I believe that Cuba has an exemplary record of upholding health as a fundamental human right. In some 128 visits to Cuba to deliver and monitor the use of our humanitarian medical assistance, I have regularly visited numerous hospitals and community-based clinics, meeting with administrators, medical staff at all levels, and hundreds of patients and their families. I have also consulted on an ongoing basis with Cuba’s Minister of Health and other leading Health Ministry officials on the country’s health policies, priorities, and most pressing medical needs.

(2) My organization was founded in 1976 to promote peace, and social and economic justice; Global Health Partners holds Special Consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council. Since 1995, we have delivered more than \$240 million (USD) in medicine and medical supplies to stock Cuban hospitals and community-based clinics; we have organized more than 36 surgical teams from across the U.S. to share skills with their Cuban counterparts; we have taken several high-profile delegations to Cuba, including the legendary boxer Muhammad Ali and two former U.S. Surgeons General, in an effort to document and draw international attention to the damage the U.S. blockade has inflicted on Cuban healthcare; and most recently coordinated a massive effort to provide more than six million syringes to enable Cuba to vaccinate their entire population against Covid-19.

(3) My extensive experience with the Cuban healthcare system has convinced me that the Cuban government views the health needs of its population as a top priority and has worked consistently, humanely, and very effectively to ensure universal, free access to high-quality healthcare for all. My concrete experience has also convinced me that the longstanding U.S. blockade against Cuba has taken a terrible toll on Cuba’s public health system. And sadly, it is the most vulnerable Cubans -- children and the elderly -- who pay the highest cost for this cruel, immoral policy that kills just as surely as bombs and bullets.

(4) Over the years, I've met with hundreds of Cuban doctors, nurses, and medical administrators who movingly describe shortages of basic medical supplies and inexpensive medicines that we in the United States take for granted. I've met women who are struggling to survive breast cancer that was diagnosed at a late stage – the result of Cuba's inability to obtain desperately needed diagnostic equipment from U.S. manufacturers. And perhaps most painful for me as a grandfather, I've sat with mothers and fathers who are watching as their children die from cancers that would and should be treatable, but for the fact that Cuba is unable to purchase chemotherapy drugs from companies only 90 miles away. Global Health Partners has helped to save the lives of many children with cancer by partnering with Havana's Juan Manuel Marquez Pediatric Hospital to supply some of these scarce cancer medicines, along with anti-nausea drugs that enable these young patients to withstand chemotherapy. As part of two Global Health Partners humanitarian delegations, Muhammad Ali personally delivered such aid to the Marquez hospital and met with the children and their very grateful parents.

(5) NGOs like Global Health Partners, despite the scale and scope of our assistance, cannot decisively combat medical scarcities the blockade imposes on the Cuban public health system, and the country's dedicated doctors are often left empty-handed and unable to fully extend their healing skills to sick and disabled children and adults. Although U.S. law permits the sale of medicines and medical supplies to Cuba, grueling and cumbersome licensing procedures, coupled with the designation of Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, actively discourage medical companies from selling or donating their products to Cuba. Since the U.S. has the world's leading pharmaceutical research and production pipeline, these licensing conditions effectively bar Cuba from accessing nearly half of all new world-class drugs on the market today.

(6) Cuba has built a public health system that has garnered worldwide respect, with health indicators that rival those of developed countries. The lowering of the infant mortality rate is one such shining example: 4.262 per thousand live births in 2020. And Cubans have a life expectancy of 77.57 years (2020).

(7) The U.S. blockade against Cuba has a negative "ripple effect" throughout the Caribbean region. Cuba has long shared its own public health experience with its neighbors, and Cuban volunteer doctors have alleviated suffering and saved lives throughout the region. Although Cuba is itself combating shortages caused by the U.S. blockade, it is extending humanitarian aid to its neighbors because of its deeply held belief that health is a human right. Because Cuba has the best medical training facilities in the Caribbean, its neighbors have long depended upon it to train their own medical personnel. But blockade-related limits on the advanced training opportunities and new equipment available to Cuban doctors and hospitals thus undermine the quality of health services throughout the region.

(8) One striking current example of Cuba's internationalist commitment to healthcare as a human right is the fact that more than 400,000 Cuban health care workers have worked in 164 countries around the world. During the Covid-19 pandemic, more than 4,000 Cuban doctors and healthcare workers were sent to 40 countries, including Italy, South Africa and Andorra, to save lives and provide assistance to overwhelmed local healthcare

providers. According to former World Health Organization Director Margaret Chan, “Cuba is world-famous for its ability to train doctors and nurses.” Several years ago, this small nation won worldwide praise, respect and gratitude for the work of Cuban doctors to stem the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. Some 460 Cuban doctors and nurses worked in the region, with 165 serving there under the direction of the World Health Organization (WHO). And most recently, Cuba sent doctors and emergency response personnel from the Henry Reeves Medical Brigade to Turkey where they provided urgently needed assistance to 3,755 victims of the earthquake. Global Health Partners is exploring ways to support the Henry Reeves Medical Brigade in these international efforts, but our assistance is severely challenged by U.S. sanctions prohibiting the transfer of funds, export licensing issues, and logistical problems due to the lack of regularly scheduled commercial cargo flights between the United States and Cuba.

(9) Cuba’s advances in medical biotechnology can also help alleviate suffering for people throughout the world. Over the past four years Global Health Partners has worked very closely with Cuba’s biotechnology sector, one of the world’s leading scientific centers, which has made incredibly strides in addressing treatments for rare diseases and diseases not currently being addressed by major pharmaceutical companies. We have worked closely with the Center for Genetic Engineering and Biology (CIGB) in an effort to introduce Heberprot-P to the U.S. market; the drug is currently being used in 40 countries and is 82% effective in the treatment of diabetic foot ulcers, a disease that particularly affects poor and minority communities in the U.S. We have also helped the Center for Molecular Immunology (CIM) to introduce cancer treatments and drugs for the treatment of macular degeneration to the U.S. market.

(10) Havana’s Latin American Medical School (ELAM) is another example of Cuba’s commitment to health care as a human right. We have developed a close working relationship with the ELAM and the Ministry of Public Health to assist U.S. graduates of the ELAM in obtaining residencies at American hospitals. Since the Cuban government established the school in 1999, the ELAM has provided a free medical education to tens of thousands of students from around the world, most from developing world countries. Students are accepted with the commitment of returning to their countries to provide medical services in underserved communities. More than 200 U.S. students have graduated from the ELAM, and we are helping to develop partnerships that will increase their effectiveness in the most needy U.S. communities.

(11) In conclusion, I have personally witnessed Cuba’s huge advances in public health and provision of high-quality, free and universal healthcare for its people. And I have directly witnessed the devastating impact of the U.S. blockade on Cuba’s public health system. What is remarkable to me is that Cuba has been able to provide such a high level of medical care to its people in the face of these externally imposed hardships, while extending its humanitarian helping hand to other developing countries. I truly hope that this Council will both recognize Cuba’s commitment to the fundamental human right of healthcare, and the need to remove the terrible obstacles imposed by the U.S. blockade. Let us all imagine how many more lives would be saved or suffering eased if the blockade were lifted – and continue to press for an end to a policy that mocks the principles and goals of the United Nations Human Rights Council.