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SA-CUBAN TRAINED DOCTORS ENCOURAGED TO BE STEWARDS OF CHANGE

Eighty-seven (87) South African medical doctors who were trained in Cuba graduated at the Walter Sisulu University in Mthatha, Eastern Cape today. This is the largest group to graduate under the Nelson Mandela Fidel Castro Medical Collaboration (NMFCMC) Programme since its inception in 1996. This brings the total of the medical doctors who have graduated from the programme and currently employed in various public hospitals around the country to 731.

This is a major boost not only for increasing the output of medical employees and strengthening primary healthcare, but also for the success of National Health Insurance (NHI), the flagship programme to change the quality, efficiency and the effectiveness of the healthcare system by ensuring that right to access is not determined by the socio-economic conditions of an individual. Cuba was a country of choice for medical training due to their successful implementation of the primary healthcare model, which supports universal health coverage and remains the key strategic objective of the NHI in South Africa.

Deputy Minister of Health, Dr Joe Phaahla and Eastern Cape Premier, Lubabalo Oscar Mabuyane presided over the sixteenth graduation ceremony. The Rector of the University of Medical Sciences of Havana, Dr Luis Alberto Pisch Garcia conferred the degrees. The event was also attended by the deans of local medical schools, MECs and HODs of health, hospital CEOs and families of the graduates.

In his keynote address, Dr Phaahla said: "Many doctors who have qualified through this programme have progressed to become specialists in various medical fields. One notable achievement is that of a doctor from the Eastern Cape who has just made history when she became the first African female cardiothoracic surgeon in the country".

The medical training programme was founded in an attempt to complement and increase the production of medical doctors in South Africa. Human resource development is one of the nine priorities of the National Development Plan (NDP) for 2030 to ensure a well-functioning and effective health system - a priority that also informs the vision of the programme of improving the quality of life through promotion of access to healthcare services.

The main focus was to address the over-concentration of health employees in urban areas and in the exclusionary private sector; insufficient employees who were also not in possession of the necessary training and the under-provision of healthcare in rural and peri-urban areas as well as informal settlements. The rural under-served communities where the Department of Health has always struggled to attract medical practitioners, stand to benefit from this initiative as the doctors are expected to serve the communities they came from.

The new doctors completed five years of medical studies in Cuba and one year of clinical training in the country's universities as part of their integration into the South African health system. The

universities include Stellenbosch (SU), Limpopo (UL), Free State (UFS), Pretoria (UP), and KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Eastern Cape (WSU), Cape Town (UCT) and Gauteng (SMU) and Wits. The graduates are from Eastern Cape (8); Gauteng (7); KwaZulu-Natal (16); Limpopo (16); Mpumalanga (14); North West (15) and Northern Cape (11).

The Vice-Chancellor and Principal of Walter Sisulu University, Prof. Rob Midgley congratulated the graduates for successfully completing their academic programme. "You have now become a member of an elite group of graduates who join the ranks of medical professionals that will serve the world. Your success has furthered our commitment to equipping the future generation of South Africans with the skills and determination that they will need to find innovative and sustainable solutions to the national and global challenges of today. We know that you will enter the next stage of your journey with a passion to bring positive changes to tomorrow," said Prof. Midgley.

Representing the Cuban government, Ambassador of Cuba to South Africa, Honourable Rodolfo Benitez Verson, reminded the graduates of their obligation to serve the society with diligence as people demanded and deserved their competence. "The golden rule for a sustainable healthcare system is prevention. We hope that you sustain and promote that notion as you embark in your duties as agents of a healthy life for all and social justice," he said.

As stewards of change and good ambassadors of the legacy of Nelson Mandela, the new graduates are expected to assist the country towards a more primary healthcare-centred approach in the delivery of healthcare services and to address the current and emerging challenges in the healthcare system.

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