

**SPEECH BY MINISTER OF HEALTH DR JOE PHAAHLA ON THE
OCCASION OF THE GRADUATION CEREMONY OF THE SOUTH
AFRICAN MEDICAL STUDENTS GRADUATING FROM CUBA
UNIVERSITIES**

AT THE CAMPUS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO (TURFLOOP)

09 DECEMBER 2021

Programme Director

Limpopo MEC of Health; Dr Phophi Ramathuba

North-West MEC of Health; Mr Madoda Sambatha

Vice-Chancellor of the University; Prof Mahlo Mokgalong

Representative of the Cuban Embassy in South Africa

Heads of Health Departments

The Academic community, and other dignitaries

Parents and relatives of the graduandis

Ladies and gentlemen.

It gives me pleasure to be present in this auspicious occasion to mark the lifelong fulfilment of these young person's aspirations. This fulfilment continue to cement the bond born out of the agreement of friendship and solidarity the two erstwhile presidents of South Africa and Cuba, President Nelson Mandela and Commandant Fidel Castro, penned on Nelson Mandela/Fidel Castro Medical Collaboration Programme.

The agreement was an affirmation of comradeship of the two nations born out of struggle for human emancipation, as the other sought liberation from the heinous system of apartheid oppression and the other in battle against blockade to trade with the rest of the world.

As the sense of victory emerged, the two deemed it necessary to strengthen the bond of our people and indicate the possibility of a common future, the future of justice, solidarity and better life for all.

The two, as we continue to celebrate them posthumously, have firmly vowed that these young people will have opportunity to realise their aspirations through this study exchange programme, a further contribution of Cuba in the building of the South African nation.

Today we celebrate your achievement and welcome you into the South African health fraternity, to apply the knowledge you acquired and contribute in the building of a sustainable health system in South Africa.

Many ask the question, why should it be Cuba training, but it is because it fitted into our strategic objective of building a comprehensive general system with Primary Health Care approach, moving away from the curative specialized medicine and surgery focused medicine. The Cuban training programme is based on the following pillars which include:

- **Disease prevention** which focuses on specific efforts aimed at reducing the development and severity of chronic diseases and other morbidities;
- **Health promotion** which focuses on keeping people healthy through healthy behaviours, and making changes that reduces risk of developing chronic illnesses;

- **Treatment** which focuses on the management and care of a patient to combat disease or disorder;
- And, **Rehabilitative** medicine which focuses on the prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation of those with disabling medical conditions or trauma.

The objective is that this training gives us a firm base for the building and development of our Universal Health Coverage system. This requires doctors with a strong orientation of primary health care and the willingness to work in rural and peri-urban set up.

The world is engulfed today with the pandemic of Covid-19, which has disrupted the normal lifestyles of the people. The responses have been multiple from different governments, institutions and people. Here, at home we have had our own responses, from lockdown at the beginning, massive testing and now the vaccination programme.

Whilst we have made huge strides in the vaccination programme, just over 17.2 million people vaccinated and administered 26 million doses of vaccine. There is a huge negative message circulating amongst our people about the safety and usefulness of the vaccine.

All of these have demanded the resoluteness and sacrifices of our health workers; doctors, epidemiologists, clinicians, researchers, nurses etc. to stand in the frontline to save lives of the people.

I am really happy particularly because your graduations come at that time when we need more of your caliber to join the sector to fight and push back the pandemic of Covid.

You are here to enable us to continue reduce the capacity gap and gradually solidify our health system to deal with these kinds of health emergencies.

Further, together with us you are faced with daunting task of making our people to appreciate and accept the scientific approach in dealing with the pandemics – practice the non-pharmaceutical measures and take the vaccine.

The opposite of these is the unnecessary loss of life, and destruction of the economic activity and livelihoods.

We appreciate that the road to qualify as medical doctors was grueling and required an incredible amount of tenacity and resilience, and that the celebration of your achievement here today proves that you rose to the challenge and succeeded where many of your peers failed.

I am confident that based on your learning background, you will contribute immensely to the implementation of the Universal Health Coverage system (NHI) and ensure that the people of South Africa enjoy the Health dividends of our democracy.

You, too have followed on the path walked by your 3000 predecessors produced by this programme to strengthen our health system and care for our people. We convey our sincere gratitude your families and pay homage to yourself for the perseverance you had in pursuit of the dream of being a medical doctor.

We looking forward to experience your service to the people, and hope that you will be the guiding light in realizing “the Lifelong and healthy life for everyone”.

Let me further appreciate the partners in this programme, in particular the Cuban government, their universities and academics, Our government departments, our Medical schools and all stakeholders involved to make this life fulfilment achievable.

Lastly, the University of Limpopo for hosting this graduation ceremonies.

We will remain indebted to you.

I thank you.