

**SPEECH BY DEPUTY MINISTER OF HEALTH, DR SIBONGISENI DHLOMO ON THE OCCASION OF THE GRADUATION CEREMONY OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN MEDICAL STUDENTS GRADUATING FROM CUBAN UNIVERSITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN**

**FRIDAY, 07 JULY 2023**

- Master of Ceremony,
- Greetings to the Chancellor of University of Cape Town, Dr Precious Moloi-Motsepe
- The Interim Vice Chancellor University of Cape Town, Professor Daya Reddy
- Cuban Ministry of Public Health delegation led by Dr Fidela Mariana Reyes Obediente,
- Acting Vice Chancellor, University of Havana, Republic of Cuba, Professor Heidi Soca Gonzalez
- My colleagues and Provincial MECs for Health,
- Dean of Health Sciences University at UCT, Professor Lionel Green Thompson and leadership of the faculty,
- Our Health Attaché in Cuba, Dr Sanele Madela,
- Members of the UCT Senate present today,
- The Academic community and other Distinguished Guests,
- Representative of the Graduands,
- Families and Friends of the Graduands,
- Ladies and Gentlemen
- Members of the media

It is my pleasure to be part of this august gathering and Congregation of the University of Havana as constituted today by the Acting Chancellor, to witness the awarding of Qualifications in Medicine to the graduands.

As we meet in such gatherings we always reflect on two of our stalwarts' heroes, visionaries and distinguished revolutionaries who brought about change in the lives of these graduands.

This ceremony would not have been possible without our selfless leaders and gallant freedom fighters, President Nelson Mandela and El Comandante President Fidel Castro, who believed that education is the key that unlocks the golden door to freedom, hence they saw a need to come up with Nelson Mandela Fidel Castro Medical Collaboration Programme.

Today we confirm that this relationship and partnership between South Africa and Cuba has yielded huge human capacity for the medical fraternity particularly medical doctors. This is a remarkable milestone that cannot be hidden or forgotten given the impact it has in South Africa. This is a Legacy and a living testimony of the impact of this relationship brought about by our stalwarts.

Our thank goes to the people and citizens of Cuba, for hosting our graduands and make them feel at home 12,180 km away from their home, and also becoming a beacon of hope for the world and international affairs. Let me also congratulate our brothers and sisters in Cuba and the government of Cuba on the occasion of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cuba's international medical collaboration which was celebrated on the 23 May 2023.

I joined the officials at Cuban Embassy on this important day for Cuban citizens to show our unwavering support and wished the Cubans well.

This collaboration signify the impact Cuba has internationally in the area of medical collaboration and other related faculties. This celebration also highlights the importance of this solidarity work which benefitted 165 nations around the world, including South Africa from social solidarity, excellent internationalism and medical cooperation with Cuba through medical doctors and specialists which immensely contributed to the country`s health system strengthening and pandemic response.

We are told that the Cuba's international medical collaboration began in Algeria, at the initiative of the Commander in Chief, on May 23, 1963, and since then, more than 605,000 collaborators in the sector have offered their services in 165 countries.

As South Africa we are still enjoying this valuable partnership through the Medical Brigade Programme where most of the doctors from Cuba are serving our underserved communities and universities. We also appreciate the enormous assistance we received during the COVID-19 epidemic through a team of medical doctors, including community health and infectious disease specialists to assist our country`s response to the one of the deadliest health crisis of our lifetime.

Today, as these young people graduating and celebrating their academic achievements, it is also reminder to us that their alma mater is a University in Cuba and not South Africa.

Today we are here to confirm Cuban Medical Degrees to 454 medical doctors who worked tirelessly, day and night, and ***now they are waiting for their names to be called, while their bodies are shaking with disbelief***, these are the words by the late Legendary musician and songwriter Tsepo Tshola, affectionately known as “the village pope”.

Let me take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the provincial governments which have been consistently participating in this programme through sending students to Cuba to become doctors to contribute to our public health system as the country is preparing to rollout the National Health Insurance to ensure all South Africans have equal access and affordable healthcare, irrespective of their financial muscles and geographical location.

In this group, the graduands are represented provinces as follows: Eastern Cape (27), Free State (3), Gauteng (124), KwaZulu-Natal (43), Limpopo (110), Mpumalanga (63), North West (56) and Northern Cape (27).

These numbers are making a significant impact in terms of increasing our Human Resources for health in particular, medical doctors in rural areas and underserved and disadvantaged communities where the students were selected.

To date we have produced over 3000 medical doctors through the Nelson Mandela/Fidel Castro Medical Collaboration. Our desire to increase medical professionals from which South Africa has benefitted the South African health professions immensely through this increase of numbers.

The demand for doctors and other healthcare workers remains a huge challenge in our healthcare system and this increase provides inroads of increasing health capacity.

I wish to say to doctors who are graduating today, Welcome to the cadre of health professionals, dedicated man and women, dedicated force that has demonstrated resilience during the height of COVID-19 pandemic and who will serve their communities with dignity and in ethical manner.

As you take the Hippocratic Oath today, kindly note that this oath describes a promise made by yourselves to try not to harm anyone. The oath obligates your efforts to protect individual rights and public interests. In your daily practice as you serve those that depend on you in our health services, please balance competing interests and values, and draw your

actions on ethical principles as tools for weighing conflicting claims and for reaching appropriate decisions.

Your role is to save lives of our people. I wish to express our gratitude to the families and relatives for having withstood and endured the absence of their children and loved ones, as they had to stay in Cuba to acquire the skills and expertise to contribute to this noble profession and critical service for our country.

***One day I visited a friend at Steve Biko Academic Hospital in Pretoria, the health facility was very busy with lots of patients and visitors. I found the hospital spotlessly clean, staff highly professional and orderly. The patients looked cared after and the air of competence permeated every nook and cranny. The hospital is simply well run. I had to remind myself that this is a public facility. What a pleasure to see. May the staff at Steve Biko continue on that trajectory!!***

We know that you have been praying for them and providing the necessary support throughout the good and tough times. Your patience and support has borne fruit today and I know most of you are jubilant today as the pain has now culminated into this great achievement that we are witnessing and celebrating today.

Today we celebrate your achievement and welcome you into the South African health fraternity, to apply the knowledge you acquired and contribute to the building of a sustainable health system in South Africa. There are many who still 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 hospicentric focused medicine.

It is important to note that the Cuban training programme is focused on the key pillars of Primary Health care including Prevention of disease; Health promotion with a focus of keeping people healthy; Treatment which focuses on the management and care of a patient to combat disease or disorder; and Rehabilitative medicine.

The pillars from the Cuban Model provided these doctors with a firm base for the building and development of our Universal Health Coverage system.

The National Health Insurance Bill that has recently been passed by the National Assembly requires doctors with a strong orientation of primary health care and the willingness to work in rural and peri-urban set up and livelihoods.

We appreciate that the road to qualify as medical doctors was challenging and required resilience from your side and the celebration of your achievement here today proves that you rose to the challenge and succeeded where many of your peers failed.

I hope that your learning background, you will contribute greatly 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.

Today you are joining other doctors who came before you and produced by this programme. We are therefore looking forward to experiencing your service to the people, and hope that you will be the guiding light in realizing “the Lifelong and healthy life for everyone.”

The government of South Africa wishes to again 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 Cape Town for hosting the Academic Joint Meeting which started on the 5-6 July including this graduation ceremonies.

We are really thankful Professor Green Thompson, your organising team, and Faculty of Health Sciences.

I thank you