

The Blockade and the Health of Cuban Children

By Annalie Rueda Cardero

“The life of a single human being is worth a million times more than all the property of the richest man on earth.”

—Che Guevara

January 1, 1959 marked forever the course of Cuban history. The triumph of the revolution brought with it countless new processes of deep transformation in all the structures that govern a society. Radical changes were forged together with the people and with that came the guarantee of free medical care to the entire Cuban population.

As early as the 1960's the creation of the National Health System made it possible to deliver medical services to even the most remote rural areas. The new system's most sacred mission was to give priority to the health of the people. The goal was that no child would die from a curable disease and that infant mortality rates would fall to levels of first world countries. The foundation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was put in practice, simply put, the right to the life.

While Cuba proclaimed the Socialist nature of the revolution as being "for the poor, by the humble and for the humble" the United States punished the Antillean nation that had dared to fight for their independence and their freedom from only 90 miles from its shores. They institutionalized the punishment for such audacity by establishing the longest economic, financial and commercial blockade in the history of mankind.

The former USSR and the countries of Eastern Europe showed their solidarity and support to the nascent Cuban revolution to cushion the impact of the blockade. But with the collapse of the Socialist camp in the nineties, the United States set as its main objective to inflict hunger and diseases on the Cuban people. They went about strengthening the blockade by introducing and enforcing new draconian laws like the Torricelli Act and the Helms-Burton Bill that remain intact today.

All sectors of Cuban society were adversely affected including the health system that now faced the lack of availability of resources, supplies, equipment, raw materials and technologies for medical care for the entire population. The shortages of medicines, equipment and disposable materials began to infringe directly on the quality of life of the Cuban people.

Cuba has responded by the creation and installations of Advanced Technologies nationwide to overwrite the shortages so they can carry out transplants, cardiovascular surgery and treatments and interventions of Nephrology. Unfortunately, several of the necessary components needed are made in the United States or have a 10% raw material from that country; by virtue of the blockade - with rare exceptions - it is impossible to acquire them or the steps necessary to buy them are indefinitely prolonged. Cuba is forced to travel a long and costly road to obtain them in third

countries. It would take countless articles to document and explain in detail the damage caused both directly and indirectly to something as vital sensitive as health.

For 24 years the Cuban Government has presented an annual report to the General Assembly of the UN on damages caused by the blockade and the need to put an end to this genocidal policy. Beyond the figures it is difficult to quantify the magnitude of the negative impact caused at the human level. But mentioning a few examples will help to better understand the urgency of the matter.

We Cubans live with the impossibility of accessing technologies and accessories for from the U.S. market for performing dialysis (artificial kidney machines and their components). For patients living with this condition every minute counts but with the perverse logic of the blockade all that happens is an increase in suffering to humans that are already at a disadvantage. We could easily get what is needed given the close proximity of the U.S. and its price competitiveness. But that would be humane logic for a group of patients many of whom are children.

One example of the constraints facing the country is access to Amnionmax, a culture meant to detect birth defects in pregnant women over 38 years old. This product, produced in the U.S., is a unique medicine that is internationally known for performing this test.

Another example is the difficulty that it takes us to fulfill the need for XP - Maxamaid and Maxamun which is a powder used in special foods for children with phenylketonuria, a congenital disorder of metabolism that does not allow the child to process amino acids in the liver.

Cuba made a request to Abbott Laboratories to purchase equipment used to dose the immunosuppressant Tacrolimus (FK506), but because of the blockade they have not responded to our order. This has affected the program for those children that need a liver transplant. Sadly for these Cuban children, the needed product is once again produced in U.S. laboratory. Advances in medical science are essential for monitoring blood levels whose variations can bring complications by infections and secondary tumors. The Cuban State is criminally denied these products for children who need liver transplant operations only because Cuba is a blockade country.

Painfully, serious problems like those mentioned are part of the daily life of the Cuban people, continually looking for alternatives and possible solutions with limited resources to overcome them. Our society is filled with an inventive spirit to meet the gaps imposed by the blockade in every segment of the population. Health institutions do not escape the problems caused by the blockade and precisely for that reason we come to this sad story.

The Borrás-Marfan Pediatric Hospital located at 801 17th Street in Vedado has as its primary purpose the promotion of an optimal state of physical and mental health. They

are responsible for early diagnosis and treatment of possible anomalies. The hospital has a highly qualified staff that is passionate about what they do.

I remember a teacher of mine years ago started a class by saying, “never forget that talent gives wings but love decides the flight.”

The case of Abby reminded me years later of that saying. Abby has been hospitalized in this institution in a coma since the young age of 14 months and has been put through a difficult series of tests and procedures to combat bacterial meningoenzephalitis that changed her life and consequently the life of her entire family. For 7 months a room in intensive care has been their home. It is there where she experienced the intricacies of suffering and struggling to live and in every sense of the word her doctors and nurses have been with her every step of the way with tenderness and great humanism; which is the way health care professionals are trained in Cuba.

Remembering the question that the Cuban Foreign Minister once asked; ‘How much is the life of a child worth?’ Our team posed that question to the head of the Marfan hospital intensive therapy, Dr. Julio Cesar Francisco Vera, who responded without hesitation. “How do you quantify the value of life? Children are not responsible for the political problems. If they were the ones blockaded what would they say? I would like to have the chance to ask that to the Congress of the United States.”

With 18 years of experience in intensive care Dr. Vera has had plenty of opportunities to reflect on the great joy and sorrow that comes with his profession. With evident satisfaction he told us how he felt when he passes through the hospital bumping into patients already grown up with families and how they greet him with a hug and a simple thank you.

As we talked with other doctors at the hospital we learned of some of the medical missions they had been on including in Pakistan after the earthquake there in 2008. These are the true, mainly anonymous, heroes that this Revolution has produced.

One of the important human aspects of Cuban doctors is to make sure not to transmit to the young patients and parents any anguish or hopelessness from the gaps caused by the blockade. They are trained that in silence they will have to manage so that the lack of material resources does not impede the performance of their duties in providing the patients with the best care possible.

Essential resources such as mechanical ventilation, ultrasound equipment, catheters, suction tubes, mochitas – small needles for analysis that will prevent harm to the delicate skin of children-, the lack of antibiotics and the delay in acquiring them because they have to be purchased through a third country. The absence of special nutritional diets which are vital for a gravely ill patient are just one more difficulty that these medical teams face.

Another member of the medical team, Dr. Erick Alonso González, said as with all children and despite all the limitations, they have spared no effort with Abby. During her

long hospitalization she has gone through to 3 tracheotomies, a permanent gastrostomy, she suffers from a static lesion of the central nervous system, visual and auditory limitations, diabetes and she has overcome 5 heart failures. She fights nonstop to live. That is the way those around her feel, those who see Abby in the arms of her mother a woman who has not stopped a second to fight for the life of her daughter.

As the mother of a three-year-old girl myself it is extremely painful for me to think of every boy or girl who like Abby between life and death because what they need is not available or arrives late because of the blockade. We can only wonder if Abby would have had better luck if she had the products available to treat her illness. How would her quality of life and hope of recovery be if the blockade was not there?

When we were about to leave and that young mother, pretty with very sad eyes said, "Abby's illness changed my life, but within all the bad I have gained many friends".

More than friends our team noticed in the doctors and nurses a great sense of family that extends to the patients and their families. A family of heart, principles and struggle. A battle that we all will have to continue fighting while the blockade persists and keeps our children and our people at a cruel disadvantage.

Cuba will defend its right to life, to development that we determine. The Cuban people have the support of the international community in our just demand to put an end to the economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed by the Government of the United States for more than half a century.