

¡SALUD! The Film: Cuba and the Quest for Health

PG Bourne, CW Keck, G Reed, Executive Producers.
2006. 93 minutes. Price varies; check online:
www.saludthefilm.net/ns/synopsis.html.

On a recent visit to Ohio for the annual conjoint public health meetings, I was delighted to bump into Bill Keck (C. William Keck, MD, MPH, FACPM). Bill, as director of an academic health department jointly with Northeastern Ohio Universities Colleges of Medicine and Pharmacy (NEOUCOM) and Akron, has inspired many of us to work harder to bridge town and gown and show our students/residents the value of community service and population medicine firsthand. During the Ohio meetings, Bill scheduled a special showing of a remarkable film, of which he was a co-producer, called: ¡SALUD! The Film, with the subheading: Cuba and the Quest for Health. Even without the popcorn, attending the showing was definitely the right thing!

From the first glorious images of Cuba and remarkable portrayals of dedication and humanitarianism, extending to the far corners of the globe, Academy-Award nominee Director Connie Field had me captured. The imagery is truly dazzling. The sound track (I checked: It's original music by a guy named Arturo O'Farrill—remember that name) reflects the varying moods and images brilliantly. I thought the Spanish language with English subtitles would get in the way, but of course it is a documentary about this opinion leader nation and role model system in and for Hispanic America, and beyond. And the subtitles are wonderfully crafted so they are the opposite of intrusive. The film is long (running time 93 minutes) but it comes in an educator's version with appropriate pauses built in—although they are not needed for everyone!

First, it's an entirely engrossing and memorable 90-minute adventure to view at a single sitting. And second, those pauses will come in handy for the second, and third, viewings, when students will want to understand (and critique with you) the remarkable case studies embodied within the film

- of Cubans working around the world to help to serve the rural underserved when the private sector cannot or will not respond (e.g., in Venezuela and South Africa, where they were often the first doctors ever in this community: The doctors came on Tuesday and left on Thursday. Who was going to take care of us the rest of the week?)
- of aid in local response to environmental catastrophe

(in Honduras after the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in 1998)

- and the remarkable tale of global assistance to The Gambia (where the new government vision of translating the WHO mantra of "health for all" required Cubans' assistance to serve directly and train those remaining behind to take their places).

But perhaps most telling of all is the fifth case study, the link between the physician and the community in Cuba itself, following a medical student door to door as he learns the unambiguous nexus among community life, the environment, and health.

We are taken to Cuba's remarkable new medical school, the Latin American Medical School (ELAM) in Havana, where we see the joyous faces of the first ranks of graduates (lined up in Olympic grand-procession style with nation-of-origin placards raised high). An almost imponderable task has been undertaken by the school, with 12,000 students from 27 countries around the world, including notably nearly 100 from the U.S. alone. We watch a young poor student from Mississippi as she contemplates going to Cuba to go to medical school—and celebrates her choice.

We meet Bernie Thompson (D-MS) who reports from the Congressional Black Caucus visit to Cuba, impressed by the success of efforts to reduce infant mortality and increase life expectancy at the population level, putting the U.S. to shame.

Even on that too-late Ohio evening, I was thrilled to see that the film had attracted the talent of Paul Farmer, MD, from Partners in Health and Harvard Medical School, one of the most celebrated current heroes in the global campaign for health. Farmer reminds us of the crying need for dedicated physicians working around the globe.

Fitz-Hugh Mullen, MD, one of my very favorite thoughtful scholars who helps us to learn from the past of medicine to address the future, shows up as well, with several cogent and insightful observations about this experience. In true Mullen style, he mentions, with a twinkle in his eye, that there are many ways to evaluate Cuba's remarkable vision: "Great global chess player or international humanitarian; you be the judge," says Fitz.

When you receive your copy, you will be impressed, as I was, by the entirely professional and polished packaging which accompanies the DVD.

The folio cover carries some of the most memorable images from the film: the hopeful faces of the students, the sweet smiles of greeting children, the caring countenance of the international physician volunteers, and the bold colors.

Inside, there is a wonderful four-folded brochure of

the film, exclaiming on the cover: "A great film," quoting William D. Rogers, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. Inside there are other impressive positive comments. Georges Benjamin, MD, FACP, Executive Director of the American Public Health Association, and a regular reader of our Journal, exclaims: "'Salud!' shows us health for all is possible." Even Patch Adams weighs in!

It was good to see the profound dedication on the face of Narciso Ortiz, an ELAM student from New Jersey, quoted as saying "where I'm from, people don't go to the doctor." He observes, as did Michael Moore in his recent expose "Sicko," that in Cuba people go straight to the doctor "without talking about insurance and without paying a bill."

Also in the folio there are a series of useful 1-page summaries of the conception; brief biographies of the directors and producers, including Bill Keck; several pages of reviews; and a two-sided synopsis. I was struck, having seen the film twice before reading them, how much the quotations in the synopsis bring the film alive. Particularly moving and meaningful, having seen how much the Cubans brought to post-Apartheid South Africa, was the quote from former Director General of Health, Dr. Ayanda Ntsaluga: "Cuba shared our philosophy of health equity, prevention-oriented care, and training doctors for public service." But surely you, dear fellow medical movie-goer, and I share those visions, do we not?

So what are the lessons for us to RE-learn and bring to our own teaching? Surely not, as the film reminds us, the "Cubanization" of American medicine. Nor to take at face value any claims of the quality or sustainability of the model or its fledgling efforts or recent, not yet tested-in-battle graduates. These will take time, transparency, and talents of many from around the globe—including many of you, I hope.

But rather, for us, there are several simple reminders:

First, "health equity" is not just a convenient slogan, but an achievable vision in our country, too. As we watch the current presidential political campaigns raging for over 2 years in America, surely we can evaluate the speakers by the extent to which they articulate the unacceptability that our country might leave out any of

us. Surely we must be judged by the extent we care for those least fortunate among us!

Second, "prevention-oriented care" is not just a convenient slogan. We have much of the evidence we need, and the scholarship to weigh it and convey it, through our U.S. Preventive Services Task Force and American College of Preventive Medicine's Policy Committee's reviews and recommendations. How can we possibly justify not only not paying for it with first-dollar/nondeductible coverage but, in some plans, not covering it at all?

Third: "public service" is not just a convenient slogan, either! We can and we must train doctors for public service. No, I'm not saying that I'll run out, having watched Cuba's approach, and require the neurosurgeons and pediatric cardiothoracic folks to put down their scalpels and check the water supplies. But surely we must require that ALL physicians understand, respect, and advance these efforts on behalf of those among their fellow physicians who DO enter these community- and population-level pursuits. And if we're willing to consider post-graduate medical education a vital and re-imbursable component of our current national medical financing under Medicare-allowable costs, surely, too, we can find ways to pay for the training of our cadre who are willing to devote their professional efforts to public service here and around the world.

Thanks, Bill, for staying late that day in Ohio. And thanks, Bill and colleagues, for giving us this gem of a film to help us to educate a new generation of physicians in these achievable visions, and in the process re-educate ourselves.

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