

Cuba's Ills Encroach On Health

By HOWARD W. FRENCH, Published: July 16, 1993

SANTIAGO DE LAS VEGAS, Cuba— To enter the carefully manicured grounds of the sprawling sanitarium here, a dozen miles south of Havana, is to be reminded of a prerevolutionary world of oligarchs and rolling ranches.

All the splendor of the estate that once stood here has been preserved, but put to a different use: treatment of people infected with the virus that causes AIDS.

Characteristically for one of Cuba's prestige-building efforts in health care, there is no sign of the dinginess and decay that encroaches on most aspects of Cuban life. Even the new houses, homes for the 280 patients who live on the grounds, are built in a comfortable style, each with its own garden and equipped with modern appliances. Problem Worsening

But if the cracks spreading throughout Cuban society have not yet surfaced at the AIDS sanitarium here, Cuban and foreign analysts alike say, the island's economic crisis is seriously threatening the system of universal health care that has been widely considered one of the Communist Government's greatest achievements.

Paradoxically, some of Cuba's current health troubles may be attributed to the extravagance of its past successes in extending all sorts of medical benefits to everyone, from the simplest to the most sophisticated care. And in this sense, Santiago de las Vegas may also be typical of the system.

The Government has spared no expense on Cuba's 936 AIDS patients, giving them individual housing here and at other centers that is among the best to be found in the country. The sick at Santiago de las Vegas also receive a minimum of 4,500 calories daily, nearly twice what a normal diet would provide, and are treated with expensive medicines including imported AZT

and acyclovir as well as interferon, which is produced in Cuban laboratories.

Foreign currency shortages linked to the cutoff of Soviet-bloc aid and a tightened American embargo have prevented the Cuban Government from continuing wide distribution of free condoms, which had been the centerpiece of a campaign to blunt the spread of AIDS. Although medicines, gloves, disposable syringes and detergents are available in abundance at the AIDS center, they are in short supply at health centers elsewhere. New Ailment a Mystery

The island's economic problems have been underscored by a mysterious ailment of the eye and nervous system among more than 43,000 people in little over a year. Foreign specialists say the most likely causes for the disease are nutritional gaps in the diets of ordinary Cubans or the use of toxic food substitutes -- both the result of food shortages and of rationing.

Health specialists say the scarcity of certain products may also have contributed to a modest increase in the incidence of low birth weight among Cuban infants -- to 8.1 percent of all live births in 1992, from 7.6 percent in 1991, according to Unesco figures. A similar rise is suspected in the infant mortality rate, specialists say, although data were unavailable.

Infant mortality and birth weight are areas in which, after generations of poverty and stark inequality, this country of 11 million people had achieved standards rivaling those of most industrialized countries.

"How fast the system is crashing is hard to say, because their health system was so good, and had accumulated so much good will capital from other countries and international agencies," Julie Feinsilver, a specialist on Cuban health from Oberlin College, said during a recent visit. "The question now is how long they can keep it up." Impossible Burden

Others say that by trying to juggle the demands of a high-tech medical establishment and a comprehensive health-care system, Cuba is carrying an

impossible burden at a time of economic austerity.

Cuban officials say the country spent more than \$300 million on biotechnology and pharmaceutical research and development from 1989 to 1992, and foreign specialists say that figure probably does not include many related construction costs.

At the same time, the Government was maintaining a family doctor program requiring that a physician be stationed within 200 yards of any residence in urban areas.

"They certainly have good intentions, but one of their problems is that they have wanted to do everything at once," said Diane Kuntz, an international health care specialist with the American Public Health Association, who also visited Cuba. Too Much, With Too Little

Until recently, trying to do everything at once meant providing cosmetic surgery on demand, deploying hundreds of doctors in cooperative efforts abroad and creating an industry of health tourism in which foreigners, principally from Latin America, would be drawn to Cuba for operations that would cost many times more in the United States.

Trying to do all of this during the country's crushing economic decline has resulted in severe shortages of some supplies and a sharp increase in hardships for ordinary Cubans.

"The economic situation has affected our health situation," said Dr. Pedro Pons, director of the Policlinico Plaza de la Revolucion, a Havana health clinic that is one of 420 primary care centers in the country. "We must admit that the crisis has helped lower the health status of the people. Medicines that were once distributed at the family doctor level are no longer given out so freely.

"Almost everything has been reduced," he said. "We have had to considerably

reduce the use of X-rays. We have had to cut back on diagnostic tests, and things like EEG's and other tests have been reduced too." Hard on Doctors

Doctors say Cuba's scarcity of fuel and parts means they must wake up hours earlier to await infrequent buses or ride in the back of trucks. Shortages of medicines for common ailments like asthma have caused many doctors to spend hours each day on the telephone hunting down supplies from official Cuban sources or phoning colleagues abroad to enlist their help in obtaining donations.

For senior Cuban officials, the health care crisis, like many of Cuba's problems, was caused largely by the embargo imposed by the United States at the height of the cold war and recently tightened through new legislation.

The laws prohibit trade with Cuba by American companies and their subsidiaries, even in medicines. American specialists say that while the United States embargo cannot explain many of Cuba's problems, it has led to significantly higher costs in health care and other areas because Cuba has had to find more distant suppliers and substitutes for American goods.

The Cuban Government has taken to calling the collapse of the Soviet bloc, which once accounted for more than three-quarters of the island's foreign trade, the "double embargo." Cuba's economy has shrunk by more than 40 percent since 1989, American analysts say. In the space of a generation, Cuba's longstanding trade links with two superpowers disappeared.

"We feel the consequences of the double blockade, as we call it in every area, be it health care, housing or whatever," said Ricardo Alarcon, president of the National Assembly. "You cannot make an aspirin appear in a hospital if you have no aspirin. No people's initiative can change that."

Photo: "We must admit that the crisis has helped lower the health status of the people," Dr. Pedro Pons, lower right, director of the Policlinico Plaza de la Revolucion in Havana, said of Cuba's economic situation. (Howard W.

French/The New York Times) Map of Cuba showing location of Santiago de las Vegas.