Reviewer’s report

Title: Cuban health assistance program and human resources for health challenges in the Pacific: analysis of policy implications

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Reviewer: Robert Huish

Reviewer’s report:

This paper is an important first step in understanding the on the ground health impacts of Cuban medical internationalism in the South Pacific. The authors have done well to collect data on the Cuban presence in the region, and with their contribution, I do believe that we can build discussion on how Cuban medical internationalism works on a global scale. The involvement of Cuban health care workers in PICs is not well understood, so I do believe that this will be an important contribution to the literature.

Some additional thoughts:

• It is interesting to hypothesize that there could be increased strain on public health spending in PICs as a result of paying returning medical graduates an expected physician salary. This is an important critique and worthy of further exploration and collaboration. I would invite contact from the authors to discuss retention strategy methods used in other countries.

• It is interesting to also hypothesize the role of future collaboration with AusAID, NZAid or the World Bank. I don’t believe that there will be much latitude in forming relations with the Bank. James Wolfeshohn, the former president of the Bank, admitted that Cuba’s development success has come as a result of not being a client. However, tri-lateral co-operation with Australia and New Zealand could prove interesting. But this would require more policy work before it is taken seriously. At the moment there is no Australian or New Zealand embassy in Cuba (relations are handled through the Canadian Embassy and U.K. High Commission respectively). It would be interesting to map out the diplomatic relations with Cuba and the two countries to see about tri-lateral cooperation. This could be an important line of policy research, as Cuba has tried to form tri-lateral cooperation with other countries, such as Canada, but the proximity to the U.S. has often held such relations back. They have had success with Taiwan on health interventions in West Africa. I wonder if there is not more Geographical space to exercise such cooperation. After all, there is a historic relationship there. Australia was one of Cuba’s key trading partners in the 1970s and 1980s (especially when it came to purchasing sugar harvesting equipment).

• Another important angle that this paper will bring to the discussion is that the Cuban interventions are thought to be effective in the PICs. To date we have documentation and evidence that Cuban primary health care methods have
positive impacts through programs such as the comprehensive health brigade model in the Americas and Africa. By including the PIC in the discussion we can now get a sense that it has truly global impacts.

Discretionary Revisions:

• Page 2 – “poor health outcomes…gaining increasing attention” from who?

• Section 2 – “one of the interventions to address HRH shortages…” is this speaking directly to Pacific Island Nations, or more generally to the global shortage?

• Page 4 paragraph 1: “Upon graduation…” change to “these students are expected to return.”

• Page 4 – the South African exchange is more complex. There is also direct cash payment to the Cuban government on top of the salaries.

• 2.1 “the issue of Cuban doctors…” clarify this. What issue, specifically?

• I would be curious to know what program the Cuban cooperation falls under. Is the sort of cooperation going on PICs structured as the ‘comprehensive health program’ model, or a ‘medical education’ model? If the authors are able to provide comments on program design and structure that could be fitting. However, it is unlikely that this would be elicited from the literature review. I would suggest follow up research and I would encourage collaboration to explore this.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.