

Book Review: John Kirk: Healthcare without Borders - Understanding Cuban Medical Internationalism

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Book Review — Published Version

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Healthcare without Borders: Understanding Cuban Medical Internationalism by John Kirk.

Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2015.

384pp., £72.50 (h/b), ISBN 9780813061054

The Cuban anomaly – excellent health indicators and extraordinary public health achievements despite the country's poverty – is mostly ignored by Western scholars and journalists. The same goes for Cuba's decades-old medical engagement abroad, with tens of thousands of Cuban doctors serving in other developing countries (p. 272), often at low or no cost for the recipient country. Despite recurring 'surprises', such as recent reports about the service of Cuban doctors in the fight against Ebola in West Africa, both the public and academia seem to be content with the view that something must be wrong with Cuba's international health engagement, and that in any case such massive engagement

cannot survive, given the country's dire economic conditions.

John Kirk has sought to counter this neglect in myriad publications, including his most comprehensive work to date, *Healthcare without Borders*. In this book, Kirk provides a broad and number-heavy overview of Cuban medical internationalism, which ranges from emergency aid to medical education and follows an unorthodox model of social medicine that emphasises prevention and primary care in deprived communities.

The stated aim of the book is to provide an introduction to a neglected, yet important, phenomenon, which is attained through a very informative and accessible presentation of the topic. The first part of the book discusses the historical origins of Cuban medical internationalism and major overarching programmes. The second part presents important country-specific programmes. The account is appreciative and enriched with myriad quotes from public authorities such as the WHO Director-General praising the Cuban activities. A major argumentative thread is that these activities have mainly been driven by Fidel Castro's idealism and have thus followed a humanitarian rather than an economic or geopolitical rationale – a claim for which many plausible arguments are provided along the way. Kirk also discusses recent changes initiated by Fidel's successor Raul Castro, who lays more emphasis on cost-benefit assessments. This concern will become more acute since the drop in oil prices and the government's loss of a legislative majority in Venezuela, a country that has been Cuba's closest ally and main bilateral funder.

An encompassing overview cannot of course exhaust all aspects or go into too much empirical detail. Kirk draws mainly on data provided by the US-based non-governmental organisation MEDICC (Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba). His more qualitative and evaluative observations are based on his field trips and interviews, which are obviously not replicable. Nonetheless they provide a very good starting point and threads for further investigation.

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