

**SPEECH BY MINISTER OF HEALTH, DR JOE PHAAHLA ON THE
OCCASION OF THE GRADUATION CEREMONY OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN
MEDICAL STUDENTS GRADUATING FROM CUBAN UNIVERSITIES
AT THE ARENA HALL, UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA, MAMELODI CAMPUS**

08 JULY 2022

Programme Director,

Deputy Minister of Health, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo,

Deputy Minister of Public Health, Government of Cuba, Cde Dr LF
Navarro Martinez,

Provincial MECs,

Acting Chancellor, University of Havana, Cuba, Prof J Gonzalez,

Acting Chancellor & Principal, University of Pretoria, Prof BT Maharaj,

Ambassador of Cuba to South Africa, Excellency Enrique Orta Gonzales,

Our Health Attache in Cuba, Dr Sanele Madela,

Deputy Dean: Faculty of Health Sciences, Prof F Senkubuge,

Deputy Dean: Teaching and Learning, Prof V Steenkamp,

Members of the University of Pretoria Senate present here,

The Academic community and other Distinguished Guests,

Representative of the Graduands, Dr SJ Gubayi,

Families of the Graduands,

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is once again a pleasure and an honour to me to be part of the Congregation of the University of Havana as assembled here today by the Acting Chancellor, to recognize and bestow certificates of academic qualification to the graduands. Always when we gather in this form, we remember to cite and honour the industrious lives of two esteemed citizens of the world, selfless human beings, visionaries and distinguished revolutionaries that trotted this world, the late President Nelson Mandela and El Comandante President Fidel Castro.

Today's congregation and graduation ceremony is testimony to the foresight of these great revolutionaries who vowed that the peoples of our two countries must bond and have everlasting solidarity and friendship. The Nelson Mandela/Fidel Castro Medical Collaboration is a living testimony to the permanency of the comraderie between the two nations. As South Africans we will forever remember and uphold the place and distinguished role of the Cuban people in the global map and international affairs. We will forever be reminded by these young people who are gathered here today and celebrating their academic achievements that their alma mater is a university in Cuba.

Over a number of years, the Nelson Mandela/Fidel Castro Medical Collaboration, grew in leaps and bounds, producing the desired medical professionals from which South Africa has benefitted immensely. The glaring achievements from the collaboration signify the relevance and importance of solidarity amongst people and nations of the world, seen many years ago by former President Nelson Mandela and El Comandante Fidel Castro. Solidarity, which is the benevolent action of one to improve another's circumstance of life, remained the anchor of the relationship between the two peoples of South Africa and Cuba, acting together to fight global challenges of poverty and underdevelopment, and improving access to healthcare.

At the advent of democracy in South Africa, former President Mandela introduced a new health policy which ensured that pregnant women and children under six years of age shall receive free healthcare in the public facilities. The implementation of this policy spanned the demand for healthcare amongst the majority of our people and exposed the chronic shortage of healthcare professionals, with the relevant training and skills, in our country. On top of this challenge then, many of the doctors opted to seek work in the urban areas, to the detriment of the rural communities who needed care the most, as they were facing the burden of disease the most.

From its inception the Nelson Mandela/Fidel Castro Medical Collaboration programme opened opportunities and addressed the need

for a new medical training model focusing on preventative and promotive healthcare services rather than the historical dominance of curative health care system. The programme opened access to advanced training as medical practitioners for disadvantaged students who would otherwise not be admitted in most of the South African medical schools because of their socio-economic background. The collaboration increased the annual intake medical students and output of doctors in the country, which increased the capacity of provincial departments to place medical doctors in public health facilities in rural areas.

The programme has also produced a long-lasting South Africa-Cuba universities collaboration in the academic discipline, especially in health, involving sharing of information and exchanges in research. The quality assurance system implemented in the programme is asserted by the fact that students who completed their studies are accepted into South African university for further supervision and alignment of outcomes.

When the graduates return home they get integrated into the South African medical schools for quality assurance of their qualifications, after which they get offered places in the internship and community service programmes. Dating back from 1997 to-date, this collaboration has produced 2556 doctors, some of whom have become specialists. Annually, since 2018, it has been producing more than 600 doctors, a milestone that exceeds our local production of medical doctors.

During this ceremony we will be presenting academic achievement to 594 medical graduands of this programme. They will be joining millions of healthcare workers of our country and the world who have demonstrated stoicism in duty in the fight against dreadful diseases in order to save lives. In recognition of your efforts and appreciation of your positive response to the call to duty, we congratulate you on your life-time achievements.

In this group, the different provinces will benefit as follows: Gauteng 113, North-West 126, Kwazulu-Natal 126, Limpopo 86, Eastern Cape 83, Northern Cape 28, Free State 21, and Mpumalanga 12 doctors. The demand of doctors and other healthcare workers remains a huge challenge in our healthcare system. But also the system and our conditions as a country requires those trained in the new health associated security paradigm and preventative approach to strengthen the primary health care system. The prevailing socio-economic conditions and environmental factors requires of us to remain vigilante and maintain focus on infectious diseases as they have been shown to be the new emerging threats.

The health system in the country is gearing for huge reforms as the National Health Insurance Bill is being considered by Parliament. We are aiming at getting the process concluded during this current session of parliament, so that this opens the way for us to work towards improving access and affordability of healthcare. In envisaging the expected increase in those accessing healthcare, government is investing in

building new and improving quality of all health facilities. This will include refurbishing existing facilities, regularly maintaining equipment and introducing new modern technologies to improve work conditions for our healthcare workers.

Today, as we are beginning to emerge from the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, we are able to gather here in these large numbers to celebrate the achievement of another milestone in the historical annals of the Nelson Mandela/Fidel Castro Collaboration Programme. As you graduate, we welcome you to join this patriotic and dedicated force that has demonstrated resilience during the height of Covid-19 pandemic, saving lives of our people, but also some losing their own lives - we salute them for their courageous acts.

We wish to express our gratitude to the families and relatives for having endured the absence of their children and loved ones, as they had to stay in foreign lands acquiring the skills and expertise to contribute to this noble profession and critical service for our country. You gave them the necessary support at all times, and that has culminated into this great achievement that we are witnessing and celebrating today.

I thank you