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Article

Cuba's Green Revolution: the balm to the Achilles heel of Castro's Revolution

La Revolución Verde Cubana: El Bálsamo en el talón de Aquiles de la Revolución de Castro.

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Looking out across the organic medicinal herb farm in the Pinar del Rio province of Cuba, I am intoxicated by the scent from endless rows of German chamomile, calendula, and Japanese mint. This state-run 200-acre organic farm, known as the "Finca Provincial Plantas Medicinal," grows medicinal herbs used by the Cuban Ministry of Public Health for distribution throughout pharmacies, hospitals and clinics in the Cuban healthcare system. This is one of the largest medicinal herb farms in the 14 provinces of Cuba, and, according to its director, Sergio Travieso Sanchez, this farm and many others like it are growing by 20 to 25 percent a year.

Beginning in 1990, Raul Castro, brother of Fidel Castro, wanted to rescue the Cuban tradition of herbal medicine to provide natural medicines for its healthcare system. The immaculately maintained farm has grown from a modest four crops in its first year to a spectacular 45 crops in 2003, and has continued to grow with a small staff of only 45 workers and with no machinery. (By government mandate, only oxen are permitted for use in the fields.) As I watched the soft crimson sunset bathe the fields in a golden light, I could almost feel the purity of the herbs and the power of their medicinal value.

This State farm has to be independently profitable; its main contracts come from the Ministry of Health. The major herbs grown for use by the Ministry this season include oregano, calendula, Japanese mint, (*Mentha arvensis* var.

piperascens) German chamomile, aloe vera, eucalyptus, banana leaves, and turmeric. Director Sanchez tells us they have two seasons that are carefully planned around the Ministry's crop requirements. He hopes that with more land and the possibility of using machinery in the fields, he may be able to keep up with the growth and success of his country's "green medicine" (medicine verde) revolution.

Green medicine in Cuba is not a gentle holistic trend, but born of the stark reality of economic collapse, as pharmacy and hospital shelves became empty of expensive pharmaceutical drugs. For the last ten years, the Cuban government has endorsed and aggressively promoted the cost-effective medicine provided by herbs, homeopathy and acupuncture (1).

Before the economic crises of 1990-92, Cuba had a "sweet" sugar deal with the Soviet trading bloc, which virtually turned the island into Russia's sugar "plantation." From 1960 to 1990, Cuba was highly dependent on the Soviet bloc, importing petroleum, pharmaceuticals, equipment, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and food (even importing up to 57 percent of its calories). Amazingly, the sweet deal with Soviet trading bloc had made it cheaper for Cuba to export sugar and import all of its basic foods (2). Then in 1990 came the political and economic implosion of the Soviet Bloc and Cuba's sweet sugar deal turned really sour. Almost overnight, Cuba lost \$5 billion to \$8 billion dollars' worth of Soviet support (3), and its Soviet-style

agriculture, with its heavy use of chemicals, ground to a halt. The Torricelli Act further tightened the screws of an already existing US trade embargo, curtailing shipments of food and medical supplies from subsidiaries of American companies. Food was scarce, pharmacy shelves were empty, and there was little fuel for transportation. Life got tougher when, during the hot, humid Cuban summer, only a few hours of electricity per day were allowed to run fans and refrigerators.

Cuba's response to the "Special Period" was already bubbling under the surface of its culture. In medicine, acupuncture training was already established in military hospitals. In rural areas, the use of herbal medicine was growing, and in agricultural communities, young scientists were agitating for less dependence on agro-chemical imports and wanting to explore organic farming techniques. This crisis, caused by financial dependence on the Soviets and importation of food and medicine, was the unforeseen weak-spot in the Revolution, and ironically is what turned it "green." The green revolution in agriculture and medicine, along with tourist dollars, has become the healing balm to the "Achilles heel" of Castro's Revolution.

In 1995, under the direction of Dr. Leoncio Padron Caceres, within the Ministry of Public Health the new Office of Natural and Traditional Medicine was created. Dr. Padron is committed to an accelerated program of growth for the development of holistic medicine, as well as its integration with conventional medicine. Throughout Cuba, each neighbourhood has what is called a "green pharmacy," where alternative medicines, which compensate for unaffordable pharmaceuticals, are made and sold. Doctors write prescriptions for medicines like oregano extract (used to reduce the frequency of epileptic seizures), and 'Imefarma,' a traditional Cuban herbal formula for asthma, that is made from eucalyptus and banana leaves.

Green medicine has taken hold in a healthcare system dominated by a scientific approach. Physicians and nurses are now offered four-year specialty training in traditional Chinese medicine, as well as two-year master's programs and various courses and seminars for the "barefoot doctor" approach, all taught by expert doctors from China, North Korea and Vietnam.

In a recent press release, Juana Irene, an expert with Cuba's Natural and Traditional Medicine Program, said, "Though traditional Chinese medicine has been in Cuba for 150 years, Cuban hospitals and drugstores normally don't sell it because it hasn't formally entered the Cuban market. Noting that traditional Chinese medicines are popular in Cuba, Juana Irene said

that approximately one million Cubans annually tried acupuncture and Cuba bought traditional medicinal materials from China, valued at 60 million U.S. dollars each year. The Cuban government encouraged Chinese experts to set up clinics and schools in Cuba, to introduce new herbal medicines, to develop traditional Cuban medicine, and to cooperate with Cubans in producing traditional medicine (4).

Experts in Cuba report the integration of alternative and conventional medicines is a good approach; it will last beyond any economic improvement. Even if the U.S. embargo lifted tomorrow, and pharmaceuticals were freely available to Cubans, many experts believe that green medicine is here to stay. Dr. Leoncio Padron, National Director of Traditional Medicine, said in a recent CNN interview, "If we wake up one day to this good news, we would still continue with traditional and natural medicine as part of the same arsenal (5).

Las Terrazas Eco-Tourism Community

Although Las Terrazas is not a typical Cuban community, it was fascinating to see how its health needs were interlinked. The clinic, school and a rare commodity in Cuba -- a vegetarian restaurant -- were all used as community assets.

Las Terrazas's Green Clinic

According to Dr. Lisbett Dias, at least 30 to 40 plants are commonly used for medicine by the locals. These herbs come from individual gardens in the community and are prepared either as teas, tinctures, ointments or creams. The clinic also offers acupuncture, carried out by technicians with the minimum training. Dr. Dias, like all doctors trained in Cuba today, has at least a few months' training in green medicine.

The emphasis of care here is clearly on prevention. It is impressive to note that everyone receives a yearly check-up. Biannual exams are offered to Cubans in risk groups such as smokers and alcohol abusers. Three check-ups a year are provided for those with diagnoses such as hypertension and diabetics (6). Prevention clubs for the elderly, pregnant women, and teenagers. The whole community has access to acupuncture, herbal medicine and homeopathy, even if on a crude level. The two doctors and two nurses of this rural clinic suggest cooking classes at the vegetarian restaurant for those with diabetes and hypertension.

The children were proud to show us their medicinal herbal garden.

The local school, "Republica Oriental Del Uruguay," at Las Terrazas was vibrant and noisy as children poured out at the end of the day. Daniel Perez, the school principal, explained that his students are taught how to use plants for common problems as part of the school curriculum. The children were proud to show us their medicinal herbal garden. As part of the prevention theme, at-risk children, with problems such as obesity, receive counseling and encouragement from the school's therapist to change cooking and eating habits at home.

The Vegetarian Restaurant 'El Romero' (Rosemary)

On the veranda overlooking a lush forest we enjoyed a bountiful lunch as the founder of the vegetarian restaurant "El Romero," Tito Nunez Gudas, guided us through course after delicious course. Tito is transforming the classic Cuban diet that is typically heavy with fried food, pork, fried plantains, fried vegetables, rice, and beans, and very few fresh fruits and vegetables. Vegetarianism is very strange to Cubans. "In fact," Tito laughed, "as a child, when I asked my uncle what a vegetarian was, he replied that it was a mad man who only eats oranges."

After using vegetarianism to help him overcome his own health problems, Tito became a committed vegetarian and went on a health crusade to found three vegetarian restaurants. Without vegetable and fruits in their diets to provide the necessary fiber and essential vitamins and other nutrients, Cubans experience the same rates of cancer and heart disease as other industrialized nations. It is an uphill battle for Tito that is getting a helping hand from the crisis. Beef, being resource heavy, is reserved almost exclusively for hotels and restaurants catering to foreigners. In fact, beef is presently illegal for Cubans, who can be arrested for having the meat in the refrigerator. With meat harder to come by, people are eating lots more homegrown vegetables and fruits, and the Cuban people are almost reluctantly becoming healthier. Vegetable output in Cuba climbed from 36 kg per person in 1995 to around 99 kg in 2000. The decreased intake of dietary saturated fats, a less sedentary lifestyle and a lower incidence of obesity, has helped to promote a dramatic decrease in heart disease by at least 25 percent (7). Tito's expertise is in demand.

The Cuban diet is becoming greener and healthier whether Cubans like it or not (8). In my opinion, if more Cubans could just taste the

delicious food served here on this veranda in Tito's restaurant, they would become willing converts.

Cuba's herbal medicine; a blend of herbal traditions

Just like the rich history of Cuba's racial melting pot, herbal traditions are blended from many cultures. Spanish and European influences are mixed with those of the original Taino and Caribe Indians. West African slaves brought their own special infusion to the herbal mixing pot. When slavery was abolished in 1868 and the dark history of slavery ended, some 150,000 indentured Chinese laborers were brought to work the sugar plantations from Canton, and brought with them their own traditional Chinese herbal medicines. Today there is still a thriving Chinatown in Havana. Exploring the synthesis of traditions is an approach very dear to the heart of Dr. Carlos Manuel Mendez. Like myself, he is interested in how to guide locally grown herbs into formulas according to the principles of traditional Chinese medicine, and to bring this approach into the mainstream medical system. I expect this will be the next chapter in Cuba's herbal history and the logical progression for a country that lets very little of its traditions go to waste and has such rich herbal pharmacy in its own back yard.

Integrating Green Medicine in Cuba's Hospitals

Walking into Havana's International Center for Neurological Restoration (known locally as CIREN), is like walking from a Third World country into a modern hospital. Like many of Cuba's innovative hospitals, CIREN has opened its doors to tourists as part of the country's need for dollars. It specializes in the treatment and rehabilitation of people with neurological injuries and illnesses, whether from disease or injury. Doctors are using fetal stem cells, a controversial technology in the US, to try to restore brain and nerve function in victims of accidents and in sufferers of diseases such as Parkinson's. CIREN is also developing an integrative green medicine, holistic approach. Foreign and Cuban patients receive treatments, after being evaluated by expert neurologists and MDs with green medicine backgrounds (9).

Dr. Carlos Manuel Mendez, a Cuban pioneer of acupuncture, practices herbal medicine and heads up CIREN's green medicine department. He helps shape treatment plans recommended by colleagues. Together with Dr. Tahimi Cardiso, these bright compassionate doctors are on a mission to prove to their colleagues that green

medicine works and to confirm results with documentation and further research.

In most countries, such labor-intensive therapy would cost a small fortune. In Cuba, the treatment is affordable because the country has a surplus of highly educated medical specialists (166 people per doctor) who earn next to nothing (\$25 a month for most doctors). Patients are assigned multidisciplinary teams of experts, from psychologists to language rehabilitation specialists, as well as physical therapists. After a week of consultation, patients undergo at least 28 days of treatment and rehabilitation, although the majority of patients stay three to six months, or as long as a year. This state of the art integrative care, comes at a price, Cuba's growing health tourism has bitter critics, that accuse Cuba of an apartheid system of health care, party officials and foreigners with dollars, get all the top resources and the average Cubans must make do with poor facilities, old equipment and pharmacies without pharmaceuticals and even poorly stocked with herbs.

Cuba's Food Farming Produces 100% Organic Vegetables

In response to the "Special Period" the government offered huge financial incentives to farmers, outside of the established 5-tier pay system, just to be able to feed the people. In the words of Pablo Frias, a farmer, "food is a matter of life and death," and the incentives worked! In Havana there are now estimates of 8,000 organic "victory gardens." These farm/gardens are producing a million tons of food annually. They range in size from a few feet to several acres, and produce twice as much food with less than half the chemical inputs. Before the crises, Cuban agriculture was technically similar to California. Yet Cuba, in an unprecedented move in the modern history of agriculture, switched almost overnight to organic farming practices. Today the vegetables in Cuba are reported to be an astounding 100% organic and GMO free. Cuba's organic farming system is successful, and Cubans appear to be breaking apart the myth that "although organic farming is good for the planet, yields would not sustain Earth's population." Here, yields have been increased through organic farming techniques, a much cheaper alternative to conventional agrochemicals. Lessons have been learned in this experiment that can be shared with farmers around the world (10, 11).

Conclusion

At the end of our journey, whilst sitting and relaxing with Cuban cocktail on the terrace of the 1930's El Nacional Hotel, music of the Buena Vista Social Club wafting in the evening air, I was reflecting back on our fact finding mission to Cuba. The integration of green medicine was clearly a desperate response to the extreme crises of the early 1990's. Yet from the responses I had heard, it seemed to be here to stay, and refining itself burrowing deeper into the healthcare system. Cuban green medicine has been tested, and it seems to have proven itself. It occurred to me that if Castro's dependence on imported food and medicine proved to be the revolution's Achilles heel that inflamed the entire body of the society, then, the green revolution (along with tourism) has proved to be its innovative healing balm.

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