

Working to ensure patient happiness



Three protagonists of this compassionate work, from left to right: Dr. Jesús Rivas, Nurse Sara Tovar, and Dr. Odalys Pagés.



The Buen vivir (Good Living) program for diabetic patients was created thanks to the Ministry of People's Power for Health of Venezuela, and the Barrio Adentro (Inside the Neighborhood) Mission, which has the unconditional support of Cuban health professionals and technicians.

VENEZUELA

Alina Perera Robbio,
special for **Granma International**
(Text & photos)

• BARINAS, Venezuela.-Traces of the violence unleashed in April, which lasted over 100 days, and with which some hoped to paralyze the country, are still visible in main areas of the capital of this State.

The scenes of burning tire and medical warehouses are remembered with sadness, as well as the arrival of outsiders preparing to mount protests against the government in the main squares.

Residents became exhausted with the distribution to their usual peace and daily routine, as they told the Cuban collaborators who live and work alongside them, and who also witnessed the nightmare situation which only drew to a close following the popular vote of July 30 to elect the National Constituent Assembly (ANC).

"I remained strong throughout, I never cried," states Lázara Polledo Cuní, a 35-year-old Cuban from the province of Matanzas, in the La Pozones de Barinas Opticians. With a degree in Optometry and Optics, she has been working in Venezuela for almost two years, her second internationalist mission.

She can hardly forget the day in May when, amid street riots, she felt she might die.

"That day there were guarimbas (violent street barricades) and I, as usual, went to work. That was the worst day of my life. Around noon shots were heard, a 19-year-old boy was killed; three women arrived to the outpatient center in front of the opticians seriously affected by the tear gas grenades."

The collaborator recalls that the relatives of the deceased, who spoke openly against Chavistas, were masked and armed and calling for revenge. Lázara thought that the opticians would be burned down, as another one had already been set alight and threats were heard against the Cubans here.

It was gone 5.00pm and she couldn't leave her workplace; it seemed impossible that anyone would come and rescue her. Fortunately, a young soldier who knew her from the town where she lived went to meet her. Very discreetly he managed to get to the clinic and asked her not to say a word - so she wouldn't be identified as Cuban; thus they managed to leave in the midst of the shooting. They covered a distance of more than three kilometers in record time. Lázara could not stop thinking about her loved ones, especially her 15-year-old daughter and her five-year-old son.

As she concludes her story about those terrible hours, Lázara shares an expression that sums up the courage and commitment of the Cuban collaborators: "Here we are..." She adds that "There are opposition members who have come here for consultations. Many do not know why they are opposed (to the government). They almost always respond and say I'm right when I explain that thanks to Chávez and the Revolution they can receive care: 'Doctor, they tell me you are right.' This is the immense battle. And we have to help and move forward."

On the day of our visit we were also welcomed by the Cubans Isandra Revilla Rodríguez, a 26-year-old from the province of Santiago de Cuba (Optometry and Optics graduate), María Zamora Acosta, a 48-year-old from Bayamo (who assembles the eyeglasses), and Luis Benítez Álvarez, a 30-year-old from Camagüey (Optometry and Optics graduate). Peaceful times have returned here, but even in the most adverse circumstances, these collaborators did not stop offering their very best to the Venezuelan people.

ENDLESS COMPASSION

Facing the opticians is the León Footul Saavedra Outpatient Center, where we met

three specialists who work to heal the painful injuries of those who, if not treated, would have to have their lower extremities amputated.

Dr. Odalys Pagés Gómez, a plastic surgeon and diabetic foot specialist, has been working in Barinas since May. From the province of Santiago de Cuba, she tells us while preparing a set of dressings that in the "patient/doctor relationship we have to take great care, because those who arrive here suffer from a chronic disease, and immense pain."

In Venezuela before 2008, of the total number of patients who arrived at hospital centers suffering from diabetic foot ulcers, the amputation figures ranged from between 60 and 80%, according to data from the country's Metabolic Endocrine Program Office of the Ministry of People's Power for Health.

Today, thanks to the Buen vivir (Good Living) program for diabetic patients, which celebrated its 9th anniversary on August 18, amputation figures have been reduced to 3%. The program, founded a year after the initiative was implemented in Cuba, is designed to treat patients with diabetic foot ulcers through the use of the Cuban medicine Heberprot-P, a recombinant human epidermal growth factor.

The Buen vivir program came about thanks to the Venezuelan Health Ministry and the Barrio Adentro (Inside the Neighborhood) Mission, which has the unconditional support of Cuban health professionals and technicians. Covering a large part of the national territory, the Mission has allowed for more efficient identification of patients in need of Heberprot-P.

"The people who come here are those with fewer resources," Dr. Odalys notes, "Those who have more purchasing power often go to private clinics, and when they come to us it is because they need to undergo some minor amputation, because in those private

clinics what they do is "patch" them up, but when it comes to the crunch those affected come to us. This way we often avoid complications such as major amputations."

Working alongside Odalys is general practitioner Dr. Jesús Rivas Fajardo. He is Venezuelan, but has a strong connection with the island: he received his professional training in the Cuban province of Matanzas and is now happy to be teamed up with a Cuban colleague. "I have seen patients who have come here very depressed and who have left with a smile," he says, "That is what gives us satisfaction because what we seek is to help, to seek people's happiness."

Jesús studied for a diploma in diabetic foot care, and has not stopped his further training as a doctor. He is very grateful to a Cuban angiologist named Juan, who taught him much of what he knows today. "The treatment in a private clinic for this type of patient is very expensive; involving angiologists, traumatologists, and internists. It is a difficult path that few patients want to go through."

Nursing graduate Sara Tovar, a Venezuelan who specializes in diabetic foot care, is the third member of this dedicated team, trained to understand the immense pain of their patients, demonstrating endless compassion.

"This is a school," Sara stresses, "for anyone who enters as a student or as a professional. Every day you learn, from Monday to Friday. We work together, both patients and relatives and the health team."

Sara looks at us as another patient arrives and states: "God gave me these hands for this."

The "this" she refers to encapsulates a fundamental purpose and all the efforts that our health collaborators, alongside those of Venezuela, make to bring joy and happiness to so many others. •