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MARCIA GARCIA, A SURGEON AT HOSPITAL CALIXTO GARCIA

GRAND RAPIDS

MSU first U.S. med school to offer credits in Cuban hospitals

Working in island nation will allow students to focus on basic skills

By Heldi Fenton

Michigan State University medical students will be the first from the United States to learn at Cuban hospitals for course credit as part of an agreement with the Cuban government.

Sixteen fourth-year osteopathic and human medicine students will travel to Havana for two weeks in April to take part in the clinical experience. They will spend the first week in a classroom setting and then visit and observe at three hospitals Calixto Garcia, the country’s oldest general teaching hospital; Hospital Pediatrías Docente Centro Habana, focused on pediatrics; and Hospital Materno Ramón González Coro, a setting focused on obstetric and gynecologic care.

The students primarily will work with Marcia García, a surgeon at Hospital Calixto Garcia and an instructor with the University of Medical Sciences in Havana. García also serves as an adjunct professor in MSU’s Institute of International Health.

The program is one Gary Willyerd, an associate dean in MSU’s college of Osteopathic Medicine, looks forward to with great anticipation. Conversations began about two years ago but were accelerated this summer as the U.S. restored diplomatic relations with Cuba.

"Cuba has a fantastic medical education system," Willyerd said. "It's a very exciting time."

Though Cuba is considerably behind the U.S. in terms of technological advancements, the country has one of the lowest infant mortality rates in the Western Hemisphere. There are reports to be 4.65 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, compared to 5.87 in the U.S.

Practicing doctors in the U.S. have the advantage of turning to CAT scans or MRIs to properly diagnose a patient. In Cuba, students will see doctors cannot immediately resort to these advanced screens.

Instead, Willyerd said, the students will learn to focus on their basic skills, using their hands, eyes and ears. They will observe Cuban doctors at work as they use different approaches.

And the students will work with the best, as they are under the watchful eye of García.

"She’s a fantastic physician and just a wonderful role model," Willyerd said. "She’s an amazing woman, very, very committed to making medicine better."

García said she is excited for those coming to see Cuban practices firsthand.

"Health care and the study of medicine is completely free in Cuba, from a simple doctor’s visit to a heart transplant or cosmetic surgery," García said through a translator. "I believe that U.S. students will find that Cuba, despite its material difficulties, in fact provides good service to patients at all levels, and that students will understand the excellent epidemiological results that Cuban medicine has achieved to this day."

García continued: “I think that if students capture the essence of Cuban medicine, they will have a different awareness of medical practice, not just as a way to make a living but as a beautiful duty to other human beings.”

She anticipates professionals in her country will learn from some of the U.S. practices students coming over will bring with them.

Willyerd said he hopes to see the program become a yearly offering for the next two weeks each April. Applications are being accepted now for the 15 class positions in 2016. Students should be able to speak and learn in Spanish.

At some point, Willyerd hopes to welcome Cuban students to the U.S. to open a true two-way learning opportunity, giving them the chance to learn from advancements in teaching hospitals here.