

# Health is wealth in Cuba, says PM

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THE buildings here are sorely in need of a fresh coat of paint, but Cuba is justifiably proud of an overproductive health system which covers everyone and more.

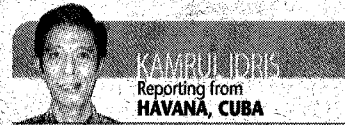
Not surprisingly, the country's specialist hospitals and training facilities usually top the itinerary for visiting dignitaries. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was taken on a tour of two of them, both shining examples of medical care for the masses.

At the Latin American School of Medicine, 1,500 poor students from 28 countries are enrolled annually at Cuban expense to return home six and a half years later as doctors in the mountains and villages.

Conceived in the wake of the 30,000 casualties wrought by Hurricanes Mitch and George in 1998, the school was built on the spirit of solidarity in times of need, said rector Dr Juan D. Carriza Estevez.

After providing emergency relief, President Fidel Castro sought to share Cuba's health resources with its disaster-struck Caribbean neighbours for the long haul. Some 10,000 are undergoing training at the country's 21 medical colleges following a foundation course at the school.

In a reversal of the capitalist doctor's career path, students are chosen for their sacrifices in ob-



taining a qualifying first degree, and have the commitment to serve in remote areas drilled into them during their instruction, said Dr Estevez.

To cock a snook at the old nemesis to the north, the school signed up disadvantaged Americans after Hurricane Katrina devastated the southwestern coast of the United States last year.

"Their success here is evident," said Abdullah.

The school offered places for 30 Malaysians, which is subject, however, to accreditation and recognition by the Ministries of Health and Higher Education.

Nevertheless, scope for institu-

tional co-operation between the two countries existed, given the Cubans' experience in providing health services to poor countries and in training doctors in family and public health, said Abdullah.

The Pando Ferrer Ophthalmological Hospital is another of Castro's "miracle" cures.

Not only Cubans but low-income patients from Latin America are given state-of-the-art treatment for free.

"The government pays for everything," said hospital director Professor Marcellino Rio.

It isn't just regional public relations. There is no shortage of ophthalmologists in Cuba, with 700 of them in practice and another 500 in the teaching hospital's plans.

"No hospital in the US has better equipment," said Dr Rio.

Judging by the constant stream of patients and the scores of so-

phisticated procedures such as laser surgery conducted each week, he wasn't boasting.

The constant reference to the superpower, however, was far from incidental.

Cuba has been under the cosh of an economic embargo by the US for 45 years and the signs of it are everywhere, not least in the dilapidated condition of its architecture.

"The buildings are old but their contents are of high quality," said Abdullah. "They don't use money for fancy buildings."

Socialism has been blamed for the country's sparse store shelves, its recycled cars and the hordes of boat people headed for Florida.

But in Cuba's clinics and the army of medical personnel who man them, "health", in the words of an impressed Abdullah, "is wealth".