

SF joins fight for US-Cuba medical cooperation

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Supes pass resolution calling for scientific and medical collaboration in the fight against COVID

BY REESE ERLICH -JULY 22, 2020

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution July 21 calling for the US to cooperate with Cuba in the fight against COVID 19. At a time when the federal and many state governments are failing to curb the pandemic, the resolution noted that the US can “save lives by entering into medical and scientific collaboration with Cuba.”

The Cuban government has successfully used interferon to mitigate the effects of COVID 19. The Trump administration has refused to allow sale or even testing of interferon and other Cuban-made drugs.

Supervisor Hillary Ronen, who sponsored the July 21 resolution, told 48Hills that Cuba’s sophisticated pharmaceutical industry has developed important drugs that should be available in the US.

“Cuba is among the top countries that found effective treatments for Ebola and Swine Flu,” she said. “Limiting cooperation with [Cuba] makes no sense.”

Cuba: only 87 deaths

The US faces a second wave of the pandemic, with California being hit particularly hard. As of July 18, the US had 3.7 million active cases with 140,300 deaths. Cuba had 2,446 cases and only 87 deaths. So US deaths per capita are 53 times greater than Cuba's.

Cuba has succeeded because of its sophisticated public health system, which tests, traces and quarantines infected people. Cuba has also developed a highly respected biotech industry.

When the coronavirus hit Cuba in March, doctors immediately started using the locally produced Interferon Alpha 2B, which helps the body generate anti-bodies to combat infection. It's being used successfully in Italy, China, and other countries.

The drug is not a vaccine or cure. International tests show that Interferon Alpha 2B can have strong side effects, which is why it's administered in combination with other drugs. Reuters reports that the use of interferon has reduced the Cuban COVID 19 death rate to 4.1 percent compared to 5.9 percent in Latin America.

Cuba has also developed a drug to combat lung cancer, which is being studied at Roswell Cancer Center in Buffalo. Cuba manufactures a diabetes medication, which sharply reduces the need for amputations.

Nesbit Crutchfield, co-leader of the Bay Area Venceremos Brigade, which is spearheading efforts to promote US-Cuban medical cooperation, said the issue is personal. He has diabetes, high blood pressure, and is a cancer survivor. As an 80-year-old African American, he faces a high risk of coronavirus infection.

"We need to collaborate with Cubans and others fighting this pandemic," he told 48Hills. "We're talking about saving lives."

Human trafficking in doctors?

Rather than promote scientific exchange, the Trump Administration has stepped up attacks on Cuba's medical system, particularly the 28,000 Cuban medical workers working in countries around the world.

In some cases, the specialized teams of doctors and nurses are provided free. In other cases, governments pay the Cuban Ministry of Health a fee, while the team members receive their regular salaries and a bonus. The government uses any profit to improve the medical system back in Cuba.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claims the medical workers are victims of "human trafficking."

"We've noticed how the regime in Havana has taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to continue its exploitation of Cuban medical workers," he said.

In reality, said Ronen, Cuban doctors volunteer to participate in the brigades. She said the charge of human trafficking is "absurd."

"I've been to Cuba and spoke with many medical professionals," she said. "They are extremely proud of their system and their aid to other countries."

Grass-roots effort

San Francisco's passage of the US-Cuba medical cooperation resolution is part of a nationwide campaign. Berkeley and Richmond city councils passed similar resolutions. Activists plan to submit proposals to city councils in Oakland, Santa Cruz, and East Palo Alto. Resolutions have been submitted to state legislatures in Massachusetts and Minnesota.

Eduardo Martinez, a Richmond City Council member who introduced a similar resolution in his city, told 48Hills, “What we do at the local level influences politics at the county, state and federal levels. Popular pressure matters.”

In the short term, activists hope to promote collaboration between doctors in the US and Cuba. Medium-term, they seek a return to the policies adopted by the Obama administration in 2017. The US restored full diplomatic relations, opened up US travel to Cuba, and encouraged trade and cultural exchange. Ultimately activists seek an end to the US embargo, but that will require a congressional vote.

“This resolution is part of a wider movement,” said Ronen. Grass-roots efforts will keep pressure Joe Biden as well as Trump, she said.

“Now is the time to make crystal clear to Biden that this is a priority of American residents and citizens,” she said.

The campaign comes at critical time, according to Crutchfield, who was a leader of the 1968 student strike demanding ethnic studies programs at San Francisco State University.

Back then, “People thought we were crazy,” he said. The progressive movement, of which US-Cuba cooperation is a part, has much wider support today, he said.

“What is happening now is overshadowing the 60s.”

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