

ASSEMBLY LINE OPERATION FOR NEARSIGHTEDNESS THRIVES IN CUBA
BY LIONEL MARTIN

HAVANA, REUTER - FROM THE EYES OF HUNDREDS OF CUBANS, SLIGHTLY PERCEPTIBLE LINES RADIATE FROM THE PUPILS LIKE THE SPOKES OF AN OLD-FASHIONED CART WHEEL.

THESE MEN AND WOMEN HAVE HAD SURGERY IN AN UNUSUAL ASSEMBLY-LINE SETTING TO CORRECT MYOPIA -NEARSIGHTEDNESS - AT THE CENTER FOR OCULAR MICROSURGERY IN HAVANA.

SINCE THE CENTER OPENED LAST APRIL, SURGICAL TEAMS HAVE PERFORMED THIS OPERATION ON MORE THAN 1500 PATIENTS, AND THE NUMBERS ARE NOW GROWING BY 500 A MONTH.

IN AN ULTRA-MODERN OPERATING ROOM, THE PATIENT LIES ON AN OPERATING-TABLE WHICH, LIKE A CONVEYER BELT, MOVES FROM ONE SURGEON TO THE NEXT, EACH OF WHOM PERFORMS ONE ASPECT OF THE PROCEDURE.

THE FIVE SURGEONS, AT WORK SIMULTANEOUSLY ON DIFFERENT PATIENTS, HAVE THEIR OWN WORK STATIONS, EQUIPPED WITH AN ELECTRON MICROSCOPE THAT RESPONDS TO VOICE COMMANDS.

SPECIALISTS AT A COMMAND CENTER OVERSEE THE OPERATION, A 15-MINUTE PROCEDURE THAT INVOLVES CUTTING +SPOKES+ RADIATING OUT FROM THE PUPIL, ON CLOSED CIRCUIT TELEVISION.

DR. OBEL GARCIA, THE CENTER'S DEPUTY DIRECTOR, SAYS THE PROCEDURE HAS CORRECTED THE MYOPIA OF MORE THAN 90 PERCENT OF THE PATIENTS, WHO ARE USUALLY ADULTS UNDER AGE 45.

THE +MASS PRODUCTION+ OCULAR MICROSURGERY CENTER IS THE SECOND OF ITS KIND IN THE WORLD, AFTER A SIMILAR INSTITUTE IN MOSCOW.

MEDICAL SOURCES HERE SAID DOCTORS FROM THE UNITED STATES, BRITAIN, AND OTHER DEVELOPED CAPITALIST NATIONS HAD BEGUN USING THE PROCEDURE ON A LIMITED BASIS.

AT THE SELLY OAK HOSPITAL IN BIRMINGHAM, ENGLAND ON WEDNESDAY, THE DIRECTOR OF THE MOSCOW EYE CLINIC, PROFESSOR SVYATOSLAV FYODOROV, DEMONSTRATED THE TECHNIQUE.

USING DIAMOND SCALPELS 20 TIMES SHARPER THAN RAZORS, HE CORRECTED SHORTSIGHTEDNESS IN EIGHT BRITISH PATIENTS, MAKING TINY CUTS IN THE EYE LENS TO RESTORE ITS ABILITY TO FOCUS.

A U.S. DOCTOR VISITING CUBA SAID RECENTLY SOME OF HIS COLLEAGUES WERE INTERESTED IN USING THE TECHNIQUE MORE WIDELY IN THE UNITED STATES, THOUGH NOT NECESSARILY WITH THE +ASSEMBLY LINE+ SURGICAL TEAM.

A CUBAN SPECIALIST WHO STUDIED AT THE MOSCOW CENTER SAID THE HAVANA EYE CLINIC IS THE BETTER EQUIPPED OF THE TWO.

+WE HAVE THE FINEST AND MOST EXPENSIVE STATE-OF-THE-ART EQUIPMENT IMPORTED FROM WEST GERMANY AND JAPAN,+ HE SAID.

THE RESPECTIVE FINANCING OF THE MOSCOW AND HAVANA
MICROSURGERY CENTERS GIVES AN INSIGHT INTO CUBA'S VIEW OF
SOVIET LEADER MIKHAIL GORBACHEV'S +PERESTROIKA,+ OR ECONOMIC
RESTRUCTURING.

THE MOSCOW INSTITUTE IS SELF-FINANCED AND CHARGES TRADE
UNIONS AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS FOR OPERATIONS PERFORMED ON
MEMBERS.

IN LINE WITH PRESIDENT FIDEL CASTRO'S REJECTION OF
COMMERCIALISM IN SOCIAL WELFARE, THE HAVANA CENTER IS
STATE-FUNDED AND ITS SERVICES ARE FREE OF CHARGE TO CUBANS.

FOREIGNERS FROM CAPITALIST COUNTRIES MUST, HOWEVER, PAY FOR
OPERATIONS AT THE CUBAN CENTER, PART OF CASTRO'S IDEA OF
TURNING CUBA INTO A WORLD MEDICAL CENTER THAT WILL BRING IN
VITALLY NEEDED HARD CURRENCY.

IN PURSUIT OF THIS GOAL, CUBA IS NOW GRADUATING MORE THAN
3,000 DOCTORS A YEAR. THE NUMBER OF PHYSICIANS IN THE COUNTRY
HAS INCREASED FROM 6,000 IN 1958, BEFORE THE REVOLUTION, TO
30,000 THIS YEAR.

THE COST TO THE FOREIGNER FOR OPERATING TO CORRECT
NEARSIGHTEDNESS IN BOTH EYES IS \$1,500, A RELATIVELY MODEST FEE
FOR PRELIMINARY EXAMINATIONS, THE SURGERY, AND 14 DAYS IN THE
MODERN CIRO GARCIA CLINIC.

THE PACKAGE INCLUDES THREE MEALS A DAY, AROUND-THE-CLOCK
MEDICAL CARE, AND A PRIVATE ROOM WITH A TELEPHONE AND COLOR
TELEVISION.

WHILE FOREIGN PATIENTS ARE ENCOURAGED TO REST, THE CUBANS
TYPICALLY HAVE SURGERY IN JUST ONE EYE, AND GO HOME A FEW HOURS
LATER. THEY RETURN FOR OUT-PATIENT EXAMINATIONS AND IF THE
RESULTS ARE GOOD, THE OPERATION IS CARRIED OUT ON THE OTHER
EYE.

THE MICROSURGERY CENTER ALSO USES THE ASSEMBLY LINE METHOD
IN GLAUCOMA AND CATARACT PATIENTS. THE CENTER SAYS THAT IN A
SINGLE SIX-HOUR SHIFT, THE SURGEONS PERFORM IN SUCCESSION ABOUT
30 OR 40 OPERATIONS FOR MYOPIA, 20 FOR GLAUCOMA, AND 15 FOR
CATARACTS.

NOT ALL CUBAN OPHTHALMOLOGISTS APPROVE OF THE PROCEDURE. ONE
SPECIALIST, WHO ASKED TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS, EXPRESSED
SKEPTICISM, SAYING THAT THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF THE MYOPIA
OPERATION IS NOT KNOWN AND THAT PATIENTS RISK EYE INFECTION.

OBEL GARCIA, HOWEVER, SAID THAT THE SUCCESS RATE HAS BEEN
EXTREMELY HIGH AND THAT FEWER POST-OPERATIVE INFECTIONS OCCUR
IN HAVANA THAN IN MOSCOW -- WHICH HE ATTRIBUTES TO THE FACT
THAT THE PATIENT'S EYES ARE BETTER LUBRICATED WITH TEARS IN
CUBA'S TROPICAL HEAT.

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