

Smiles

in Cuba and the Ukraine

By Julio César Mejías Cárdenas / Photos by José (Tito) Meriño



In these twenty years I have felt so many strong emotions that it feels as if I've spent my whole life here", Esteban Gómez told us. Gómez is director of Villa Amistad (Friendship Villa), a medical-lodging complex at Tarara Beach, 15 km east of Havana.

That's how Gómez started our conversation about the twentieth anniversary of the joint Cuba-Ukraine program for medical attention to children affected by the catastrophe at the electronuclear plant in Chernobyl, Ukraine.

In the beginning, I saw lots of orphans arriving in a semi-vegetative state. Most of them in wheelchairs and some even on stretchers, with lifeless faces and a total absence of smiles that made a huge impression on us and demanded a great deal of dedication from the specialized medical staff and from all the people supporting their work.

How much satisfaction in two decades? An enormous amount. I'm a teacher and I came to this villa when it was still the former summer camp for Cuban school students. I was

18 and now I am 48 years old. I know what it is to work with children, but, it was working in this program that I reached my real potential.

There are many things about this experience that have marked me. First, the humane professionalism of our doctors and specialists who work neither for personal gain or aggrandizement would leave anyone dumbfounded. Nor will I ever forget that during the extremely hard times of the 1990's – the so-called Special Period – we were able to guarantee indispensable resources, the food and medicines needed.

The Cuban mothers who work here even brought clothes and toys for the orphans who were alone. Those were gruelling years but at the same time very comforting because the quality of attention did not diminish an iota, not from the work of the specialists or paramedics either.

We receive emails and letters from the Ukraine every day from those kids who are today grown men and women. They tell us of their lives and how they have evolved and

Twenty years ago, in several facilities at Tarara, Cuba, a marvellous program of specialized medical attention was begun for youngsters affected by the Chernobyl electronuclear plant accident. To this date, more than 20,000 Ukrainian patients have benefited from this program and hundreds, not necessarily related to the catastrophe, are attended by Cuban specialists and paramedics.



there is also a Cuban multidisciplinary team in charge of their follow-up.

Cubaplus learned from Gómez that the program includes teaching from first grade to secondary studies. Children also enjoy didactic-recreational activities, such as visits to museums and historic places, trips to famous tourist areas such as Varadero Beach in Matanzas Province, Viñales Valley (Pinar del Río) and Trinidad (Sancti Spiritus).

Today's patients have a computer bay at their disposal so they can communicate, via internet, with their relatives in the Ukraine, get the news from their country and learn Spanish using Cuban software.

The Value of a Smile

Both program founders, Drs. Xenia Laurentis and Aristides Cintra, agree that what is most significant for them are the smiles the children have when they say goodbye to return to their beloved country.

Laurentis, assistant medical assistance director, tell us that the program started through an agreement with the NGO, Chernobyl Youth Fund, only a few months after the devastating accident. Then, in 1998, the Ukrainian Public Health Ministry joined the program which was a great boost in benefit to the patients.

At first, we were taking care of thousands of children directly affected by the catastrophe, although by now there is a ministerial commission that updates the cases, categorized by family impact. That commission delivers case files to a Cuban multidisciplinary group in the Ukraine in charge of assessing which pathologies can be treated in Cuba.

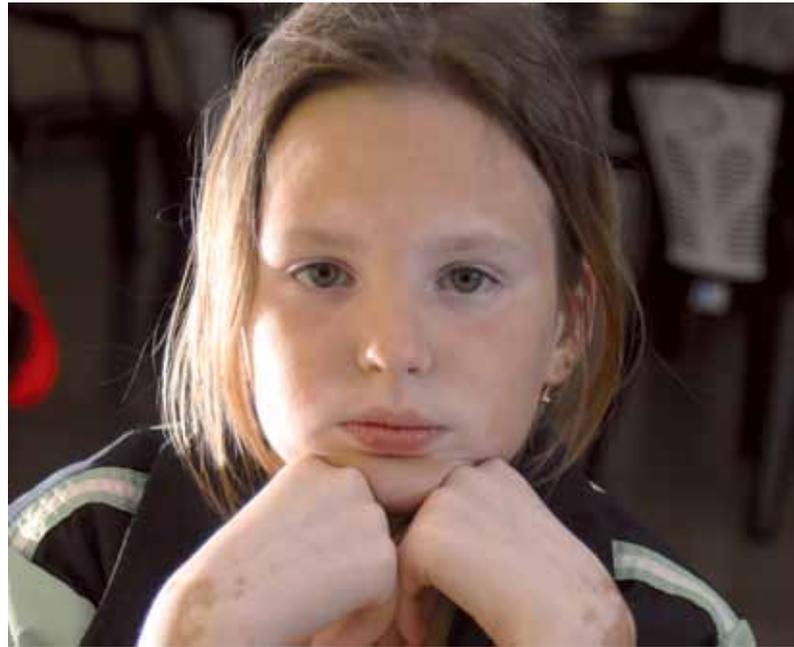
The group is made up of specialists in dermatology, haematology and endocrinology together with a psychologist and a translator. We are the only country that still provides specialized medical attention to Chernobyl victims and their descendants.

Chief Paediatrician Dr. Cintra said they are presently treating 86 children affected by endocrine, gastroenterological, orthopaedic and dermatological pathologies, such as vitiligo, psoriasis and alopecia. These latter skin diseases, he said, account for most of the cases and the results are very gratifying.

For example, there is 90% healing in all cases of vitiligo using the Cuban product, Melagenina Plus, created from human placenta by Professor Dr. Carlos Miyares Cao. In the case of alopecia, there has been a 74% reversion thanks to therapy with pilotrofina and anti-alopecia lotion, also a Cuban product.

Cristina Wants To Become A Psychologist

Cristina Magdichanskaya arrived in a wheelchair and was unable to walk. Today, after 15 years in Cuba, she not only walks but has been inspired to study psychology when she returns to the Ukraine.



Dr. Cintra explains that Cristina arrived in Cuba with a pathology known as congenital talipes equinovarus, known as clubfoot. She was surgically operated on at the Frank País Orthopaedic Hospital and after three months with both legs in casts, she started walking using crutches. Today, she can walk alone thanks to the rehabilitation received.

The Cuban paediatrician considers her case a great joint success of the clinic and the prestigious orthopaedic hospital run by Dr. Rodrigo Álvarez Cambra.

Christina's mother, Katerina Vijodchenko, does not stint on praise and gratitude for Cuban doctors and also can't stop crying when she talks of her daughter's case. "I came here with a lot of hope, but I saw it would be very difficult because the girl could not walk at all. Nevertheless, I can say that Tarara has given our smiles back to us and Cristina will be able to follow her dreams like any other young person".