



ISSUE BRIEF

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FOCUS ON HEALTH: ENHANCING U.S.-CUBA ENGAGEMENT FOR PEOPLE'S HEALTH



SUMMARY

The recent devastation from Hurricane Melissa highlights the urgent need for regional collaboration on the health impacts of climate-related disasters. Cuba's universal, community-based health system—known for preventive care, disaster preparedness, and innovative biotechnology—offers lessons in saving lives and limiting disease outbreaks. Past hurricanes, including Irma in 2017, show Cuba's ability to protect communities through coordinated, neighborhood-level response, with far fewer fatalities than the United States. Today, Cuba faces growing challenges from aging infrastructure, medicine shortages, and health worker migration, worsened by U.S. sanctions. This brief outlines these challenges and explores opportunities for U.S.-Cuba engagement to enhance disaster preparedness, advance medical innovation, and strengthen regional health security.

INTRODUCTION

Cuba has long been recognized for its universal health system, robust primary care network, disaster preparedness, biotech innovations and global cooperation in health services and medical education. Despite limited resources and decades of U.S. economic sanctions, the island has achieved outcomes—such as life expectancy and reduced infant mortality—on par with those of wealthy nations. This success stems largely from a preventive care model that is universally accessible. Today, however, due to aging infrastructure, sanctions, and mass migrations, Cuba's health sector faces severe shortages of medicines, diagnostic equipment and basic supplies, threatening decades of progress.

Engaging with Cuban health professionals and medical researchers offers a pragmatic opportunity to improve the health of people in both countries, more effectively address cross-border health threats and contribute to greater regional security. Through collaboration, we can receive earlier alerts to new disease threats and strengthen our capacity to meet a host of common challenges ranging from Alzheimer's, diabetes and lung cancer, to hurricanes, coastal flooding and wildfires. Such partnerships foster trust and further cooperation. Public health is now a question of national security, with climate-related health threats, epidemics and increasing regional migration all creating a complex, interconnected picture. The United States, working through academic institutions, medical associations, nongovernmental organizations, and public health agencies, can act as a trusted humanitarian partner at a time when strategic alliances and global collaboration are urgently needed.

WHY HEALTH COOPERATION MATTERS

Professionals in both countries have long recognized health cooperation as essential to successfully confront critical challenges ahead. Separated by just 90 miles, Cuba and Florida share a host of climate-sensitive disease risks, including dengue, Zika, and chikungunya. Such disease threats present vital opportunities for comparing experiences in mosquito control, pursuing joint research and applying medical advances to reduce the damage to people's health. This collaboration can strengthen prevention and treatment; reduce outbreaks, costs and risks to tourism; and stem the regional security threat represented by risk of widespread disease.

Cooperation with Cuba can offer valuable lessons in preventive medicine. Cuba's universal, community-based health system places family doctors and nurses in every city block and rural neighborhood, supported by multispecialty clinics in each community. With more physicians per capita than nearly any other country, Cuban health care is designed to ensure routine house calls for continuous care—critical for seniors, children and pregnant women. Life expectancy exceeds 78 years, with pre-pandemic infant mortality at 5 per 1,000 live births, reflecting the success of this model. By emphasizing value-based, preventive care, this national health system demonstrates that better health outcomes are possible even in resource-constrained settings. Preventing disease—not just treating it—keeps people healthier longer and shifts health care toward a more cost-effective, sustainable model.

Cuba's biotechnology and medical innovations have much to offer physicians and patients in the United States. The country's research centers have developed more than 30 internationally

recognized vaccines and treatments, many of which are more cost-effective than their U.S. counterparts, but unavailable to U.S. citizens. In fact, the only joint venture between the two nations is in cancer treatment, between Cuba's Molecular Immunology Center and the Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center in Buffalo, NY. Roswell is conducting clinical trials of Cimavax EGF, a Cuban therapeutic vaccine for non-small-cell lung cancer. This promising collaboration, which underscores the potential for scientific exchange to yield life-saving advances, now faces major funding hurdles due to increased political tension between the two countries.

In 2022, the U.S. nonprofit MEDICC sponsored a delegation of U.S. and international vaccine experts who visited Cuba to assess the science underpinning development and production of the country's COVID-19 vaccines. The positive findings, published in [MEDICC Review](#), highlighted Cuba's robust scientific infrastructure and ability to rapidly mobilize resources for vaccine development and application. The report emphasized the importance of international collaboration in addressing global health challenges and recognized Cuba's potential role in contributing to global vaccine equity.

INSIGHTS FROM



Cuba's COVID-19 Vaccine Enterprise: Report from a High-Level Fact-Finding Delegation to Cuba

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The global disparity in pandemic outcomes further illustrates the strength of Cuba's advanced health system. World Health Organization figures reveal 8,588 COVID-19 deaths in Cuba compared to 1,219,487 in the United States, a stark contrast that demonstrates the effectiveness of Cuba's integrated health and biotechnology sectors in saving lives.

Additional Cuban biotech advances could have a significant impact if assessed in U.S. clinical trials. For example, the diabetic foot medication Heberprot-P, already in broad use in Cuba and several other countries, has shown over 70% effectiveness in healing diabetic foot ulcers, avoiding amputations even for people with the most severe cases. If made available in the United States, Heberprot-P can benefit more than 80,000 American citizens at risk each year, with low-income, Black and Latino communities disproportionately affected by diabetic foot complications having the most to gain. Additionally, NeuroEpo, a nasal formulation for early Alzheimer's disease has shown promise in

SPOTLIGHT: TERESITA'S DREAM

Produced by U.S.-based media outlet Belly of the Beast, [Teresita's Dream](#) tells the story of Cuban scientist Teresita Rodríguez, who sets out to find a treatment for Alzheimer's after her mother's diagnosis. Her personal quest—joined by a team of women scientists—leads to the development of NeuroEpo, a potentially groundbreaking nasal therapy that may slow cognitive decline and transform the fight against this devastating disease.

The film highlights Cuba's innovative scientific capacity and has attracted international attention from researchers, medical professionals, and caregivers. Another Belly of the Beast documentary, recently released on [Al Jazeera](#), examines the impact of U.S. sanctions on Cuba's public hospitals, underscoring the human dimension of U.S.-Cuba health relations.

Belly of the Beast is an independent U.S.-based media organization that covers Cuba and U.S.-Cuba relations and is run by FOCUS community member Reed Lindsay. They produce and distribute documentary films, social media content, articles and a weekly newsletter on a range of topics that amplify local voices to foster understanding, collaboration and dignity.

Phase 2 clinical trials in Cuba and if successful, could bring new hope to thousands of Alzheimer's patients in the United States and beyond. Early results suggest that NeuroEpo may help slow cognitive decline, which can be transformative for people with this disease as well as their caregivers. Collaboration can offer access to such novel treatments in the United States, while providing Cuban scientists with more resources, funding and shared research— supporting biotech innovation overall.

As both nations face the escalating health impacts of climate change—including heat-related illnesses, rising sea levels and more intense storms—we also urgently need joint approaches to planetary health. Cuba's track record in community-based resilience and disaster preparedness has made it a regional model for effective response. In 2017, Hurricane Irma was one of the most deadly hurricanes in both Cuban and U.S. history. Despite limited resources, Cuba only recorded 10 fatalities compared to 129 fatalities in the United States. Even with significantly more resources and infrastructure, the United States struggled to evacuate and respond in a timely manner, causing more deaths and destruction. Creating shared coastal resilience strategies, like vector-borne disease monitoring, as well as climate-sensitive health surveillance, can build momentum toward a Caribbean planetary health alliance— one capable not only of responding to crises but of anticipating and mitigating climate-driven health threats before they escalate.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

Cuba's healthcare and medical research sectors bear the brunt of U.S. sanctions, straining already limited resources and putting public health at risk. The embargo restricts the import of essential medicines, medical equipment, laboratory reagents, and raw materials for domestic production. Disruptions to oil and other imports exacerbate power outages, complicate transportation, limit access to nutritious food, and delay critical hospital repairs. These pressures contribute to rising chronic conditions, shortages of essential treatments, and an unprecedented exodus of doctors and other health professionals, with older adults—the fastest-growing age group in Latin America—especially vulnerable. U.S. sanctions also create significant barriers to bilateral cooperation in health and medicine. While humanitarian exemptions exist, the restrictions complicate and discourage donations, sales, and other forms of support involving U.S. nonprofits and companies. Travel limitations and restricted visas for Cuban researchers further impede joint projects, hindering ongoing studies and clinical trials.

Shifts in the political climate in Washington have also blocked funding channels and created long-term uncertainty for partnerships across health, wellbeing and environmental sectors.

Despite these challenges, U.S. nonprofits have persistently navigated bureaucratic hurdles and leveraged humanitarian exceptions to deliver critical support. They also rely on legal pathways for academic exchanges, joint medical research, and collaborative publications. U.S. medical, public health, and nursing institutions have played a steadfast role in sustaining professional ties with Cuban colleagues, keeping lines of collaboration open today and for the future.

HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT GREATER U.S.-CUBA ENGAGEMENT

Even within the current regulatory environment, targeted actions can significantly strengthen collaboration and advance health outcomes between the United States and Cuba.



Support NGOs and foundations like MEDICC that facilitate cross-border research and practice initiatives. *FOCUS Partnerships can connect you with established Cuban and U.S. health organizations to streamline collaboration.*



Fund knowledge exchange programs to share expertise in biotechnology, preventive medicine, chronic disease management and disaster preparedness. *FOCUS Partnerships can coordinate programs, meetings and professional exchanges to maximize impact.*



Facilitate joint research and academic partnerships to advance shared health innovations. *FOCUS Partnerships can identify institutions and researchers in both countries and help manage collaborative projects.*



Provide essential medical supplies and technology to support Cuban health clinics and hospitals. *FOCUS Partnerships can recommend trusted organizations to ensure timely and legally compliant delivery.*



Engage directly through professional delegations and site visits for mutual learning in public health, biotech and disaster response systems. *FOCUS Partnerships member organization MEDICC organizes and manages these delegations to create meaningful and lawful engagement opportunities.*



Amplify Cuban innovations in treatments for diseases like diabetes and Alzheimer's to benefit patients in both countries. *FOCUS Partnerships can help share research findings, connect stakeholders and support joint dissemination efforts.*

CONCLUSION

Engagement in the health sector offers one of the most promising ways for rebuilding constructive U.S.-Cuba relations that benefit people and bring faster results from medical research. Focusing on common challenges such as cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's, disaster management and infectious disease threats can strengthen cross-border health security and make life better for everyday people, their families and communities in both countries. Investing in joint health endeavors is both a strategic and moral imperative, offering tangible benefits in the United States, Cuba and beyond.

MEDICC (Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba) is a nonprofit organization working to enhance cooperation between U.S., Cuban, and global health communities, promoting health equity and sharing Cuba's public health experiences. Founded in 1997 and prompted by publication of the study *Denial of Food & Medicine: Impact of the U.S. Embargo on Health and Nutrition in Cuba*, MEDICC began by providing opportunities for elective rotations in Cuba for U.S. medical and nursing students. Over 100 universities across the United States offered academic credit for these immersion experiences.



Later, MEDICC launched Pipeline to Community Service, a program supporting U.S. students and graduates of Havana's Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM) in passing their U.S. licensing exams and securing residency placements. Since ELAM's founding in 1999, 244 U.S. students have graduated. Of these, approximately 100 are currently working in public health, education, integrative medicine, research, and nonprofit sectors, while another 144 are completing residencies or are fully licensed, practicing across

more than 30 states. This program has been instrumental in ensuring that ELAM graduates are academically prepared and able to contribute effectively to the U.S. health workforce, particularly in underserved communities and public health initiatives.

Through 2022, MEDICC published the PubMed-indexed journal MEDICC Review, carrying peer-reviewed research and perspectives by health professionals in Cuba, Latin America and the Caribbean. Currently, the organization sponsors Community

Partnerships for Health Equity (CPHE), a network of leaders in communities across the United States who engage with counterparts in Cuba to share innovative approaches to ensuring the right to health care.



Through its Gateways program, MEDICC organizes trips to Cuba for health and related professionals, university deans and faculty, foundation trustees and others. Also, a member of FOCUS Partnerships, MEDICC provides expertise on the Cuban health and biotech sectors and offers its experience as an example of the potential for collaboration to improve health and access to quality health care for U.S. and Cuban people alike.

SPOTLIGHT: PARTNERING TO ADDRESS CRITICAL MEDICAL NEEDS IN CUBA

When Hurricane Melissa swept through eastern Cuba, it was not an isolated tragedy but part of a relentless string of disasters battering the island. Over the past year, hurricanes, earthquakes, power outages, and fuel shortages have taken a severe toll, deepening the struggles faced by families across the region. Global Links has been sending U.S.-government licensed shipments of donations to Cuban hospitals and clinics for over 30 years and is now working to address immediate medical supply shortages, supporting healthcare workers with the tools they need to care for the Cuban people.



To alleviate one of the most critical shortages, Global Links is collaborating with Global Health Partners—another long-standing organization with deep experience delivering vital medical aid to Cuba—to provide essential humanitarian assistance, including up to 60,000 of the most urgently requested types of sutures. By drawing on both organizations' decades of experience and trusted relationships across Cuba's public health system, the partnership aims to help bridge the severe shortage of surgical sutures that is currently forcing the cancellation of life-saving surgeries throughout the country. Guided by the national request list, Global Links is working to ensure the maximum number of sutures reaches the island and the facilities where they are needed most.

Neighborhood doctors and nurses on the front lines in the communities of eastern Cuba hardest hit by Hurricane Melissa also need support to meet their patients' urgent needs. That's why MEDICC is partnering with Global Links to rush essential medical supplies to primary care providers serving newborns, women, older adults, and their families. Together, MEDICC and Global Links will deliver emergency medical backpacks, equipping these resilient frontline clinicians with the tools they need to continue providing life-saving care. Global Health Partners and Global Links are part of the broader FOCUS Partnerships community working to strengthen Cuba's healthcare system during this critical time.

Global Links has been working in Cuba since 1994, providing humanitarian aid and supporting public health initiatives across the island. This year, over \$1.5 million in medical aid has been delivered to address critical shortages, including syringes for vaccination campaigns, central line catheters for complex surgeries, and supplies for a new maxillofacial unit. Specialized burn dressings were hand-delivered in Havana, and urgent requests—including surgical sutures and patient care equipment—have been fulfilled. Another shipment focused on trauma care is being prepared, and funds are being raised, in partnership with collaborators, to expand lifesaving medical assistance to Cuba in the coming year.

For 40 years, **Global Health Partners** has supported grassroots economic and social development in Latin America while leading campaigns at home to promote more sensible policies. The organization has focused its advocacy on ending the U.S. embargo against Cuba, which has created a severe humanitarian crisis on the island.

Over the past three decades, GHP has delivered more than \$275 million in lifesaving medicines and surgical supplies to Cuba, including over \$2.7 million in aid this year alone. Recent campaigns with collaborating organizations and individuals have sent six million COVID vaccination syringes and 745 pacemakers to hospitals.

In addition to the surgical suture initiative with Global Links, GHP is piloting a neonatal and maternal health project in two hospitals, providing essential equipment and training to reduce rising infant mortality.



ABOUT FOCUS PARTNERSHIPS

FOCUS (Forum for Cuba–US Partnerships) is an initiative founded by Ford Foundation grantees to strengthen mutually beneficial ties between communities in Cuba and the United States around shared goals of resilience, inclusivity, and sustainability. Founding members include the Caribbean Agroecology Institute, Environmental Defense Fund, Friends of Havana, Foundation for a Civil Society, and Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba. FOCUS fosters knowledge sharing, joint projects, and cross-sector collaboration on renewable energy, climate resilience, sustainable food systems, public health, urban resilience, and arts & culture—connecting Cuban innovators with international allies, mobilizing resources, and amplifying community-led solutions.

This work is powered by your generosity. We are a fiscally sponsored project of the Caribbean Agroecology Institute, a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit/charitable organization. All contributions are 100% tax deductible and go toward activities authorized by the U.S. Department of Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). For more information about FOCUS, write to: info@focuspartnerships.org.

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