

Nelson Mandela–Fidel Castro Medical Collaboration Programme- Keynote address.

Programme Director, Professor Nicholas Crisp, Acting Director-General of the National Department of Health;

In absentia, the Honourable Minister of Health of the Republic of South Africa, Dr Pakishe Aaron Motsoaledi;

His Excellency, the Ambassador of the Republic of Cuba to South Africa, Mr Francisco Fernández de Cossío Pinelo;

Executive Mayor of Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Councillor Princess Faku;

Distinguished leaders of Government from both the Republic of South Africa and the Republic of Cuba;

Medical Deans and representatives of our universities;

Healthcare professionals;

Members of the Ministerial Task Team and Academic Review Committee;

Our Cuban doctors and lecturers serving in South Africa;

Graduates and students of the Nelson Mandela Fidel Castro Medical Collaboration Programme;

Distinguished guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good evening.

This evening, we gather to commemorate the 30th Anniversary of the Nelson Mandela Fidel Castro Medical Collaboration Programme, a milestone that stands as one of the most enduring symbols of the friendship between the Republic of South Africa and the Republic of Cuba.

Thirty years ago, our two nations embarked on a journey that was never confined to the training of doctors. It was a deliberate investment in rebuilding a democratic South Africa through knowledge, solidarity and human development. Three decades later, this collaboration continues to demonstrate what is possible when international cooperation is anchored in shared principles rather than narrow national interests.

President Nelson Mandela understood the significance of this relationship when, during his historic visit to Cuba in July 1991, he delivered a widely renowned address at a

massive public rally in Matanzas to commemorate the 38th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. He said,

"The Cuban people hold a special place in the hearts of the peoples of Africa. The Cuban internationalists have made a contribution to African independence, freedom and justice unparalleled for its principled and selfless character."

Those words remain as relevant today as they were more than three decades ago. They remind us that the relationship between South Africa and Cuba was forged in the shared struggles against colonialism, oppression and apartheid, and strengthened by an unwavering belief that the liberation of people must ultimately find expression in improved human development, social justice and equal opportunity.

The Nelson Mandela Fidel Castro Medical Collaboration Programme is one of the clearest expressions of that belief. It acknowledged that one of the greatest injustices inherited by democratic South Africa was a deeply unequal healthcare system—one in which generations of Black South Africans had been systematically denied opportunities to enter the medical profession, while rural communities continued to experience chronic shortages of healthcare professionals.

It was against this backdrop that our governments, in 1996, established a partnership whose impact would extend far beyond the classrooms of Cuban medical universities. It became a partnership dedicated to producing doctors committed to serving the communities that needed them most.

As we gather under the theme, "30 Years of Medical Cooperation between South Africa and Cuba," we do so with a profound appreciation that this anniversary is not simply about commemorating the past. It is about recognising a living legacy that continues to shape our hospitals, strengthen our clinics, transform the lives of young South Africans and bring quality healthcare closer to communities that had, for far too long, been left behind.

The success of this programme cannot simply be measured by the number of doctors it has produced, impressive as those figures are. Its true measure lies in the lives that have been changed in villages, clinics, district hospitals, and communities that, for decades, struggled to attract and retain healthcare professionals. Today, 3277 doctors have successfully completed the Nelson Mandela Fidel Castro Medical Collaboration Programme and are serving across South Africa's public health system. Their work represents one of the most tangible demonstrations of how public policy, when driven by a clear social purpose, can fundamentally alter a nation's trajectory.

For us in the Eastern Cape, this programme carries particular significance. Ours remains one of South Africa's most rural provinces, with vast geographical distances separating communities from healthcare facilities and with many of our people living in areas where recruiting medical professionals has historically been one of the government's

greatest challenges. Since 1998, the Eastern Cape has produced 361 medical doctors through this collaboration. Among them are doctors completing internships, community service practitioners and hundreds who now serve permanently within our health system.

Cuba's internationally respected Primary Health Care model, founded on prevention, family medicine and community-based care, is closely aligned with the healthcare vision adopted by democratic South Africa in 1994. Guided by the principles of the Alma-Ata Declaration, both countries recognised that equitable, accessible and community-centred healthcare is the cornerstone of a sustainable health system. This shared philosophy became the foundation for the Nelson Mandela Fidel Castro Medical Collaboration Programme.

Thirty years ago, the challenge was to address a severe shortage of doctors and expand opportunities for young South Africans who had been systematically denied access to medical education. Today, our responsibility is broader.

The future of healthcare demands greater collaboration in medical research, biotechnology, pharmaceutical development, digital health innovation, specialist training and scientific exchange. The bilateral agreement between South Africa and Cuba anticipated this future by recognising that cooperation should extend beyond medical education into scientific research, biotechnology and broader academic collaboration. That vision remains as relevant today as it was three decades ago.

As we advance towards the implementation of National Health Insurance, the importance of this programme becomes even more evident. Universal Health Coverage cannot be achieved through legislation alone. It requires a sufficient, competent and equitably distributed health workforce. It requires doctors who are prepared to serve in rural districts as willingly as they serve in metropolitan hospitals.

The graduates of this programme, therefore, represent far more than beneficiaries of an international scholarship. They are custodians of a legacy. Wherever they practise, they carry the names of Nelson Mandela and Fidel Castro—not as political symbols, but as a reminder that leadership is ultimately measured by the opportunities we create for others and the lives we improve.

To our Cuban friends gathered with us this evening, allow me to convey, on behalf of the people and Government of the Eastern Cape, our profound appreciation for your enduring friendship. Your contribution to strengthening South Africa's health system extends far beyond clinical practice.

A big thank you to our universities, academic staff, the Health Professions Council of South Africa, programme coordinators, provincial departments, the National Department of Health, the Ministerial Task Team and every institution that has worked tirelessly to strengthen and refine this programme over the years.

Congratulations on thirty years of the Nelson Mandela Fidel Castro Medical Collaboration Programme.

May this enduring partnership continue to inspire Africa and the world, reminding us that when nations choose cooperation over division, compassion over indifference and people over politics, they create a legacy that outlives generations.

I thank you.