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A hundred beats

Universal healthcare  
By Fatima Bhutto

I spent last Sunday night at a hospital. While leaving our house a family friend slipped on some stairs and hurt her leg. The fall was a simple one, the pain was not. Neither was the ensuing battle to receive treatment for our friend. One of the many ills plaguing our country is the pitiful state of healthcare. Mind you, I'm speaking as someone fortunate enough to afford medical treatment. As you read the next few lines, full of bureaucratic hiccups, imagine the way this story would have gone if I was one of the many millions of Pakistanis who are systematically disenfranchised and left without any medical recourse due to the basic fact that it is financially beyond their reach.

Our first step was to get our friend an ambulance. It was like a game of tag. First we asked a nearby hospital to send one, but they didn't have any on hand. They put the call out on the wire and ordered one. As we sat on the gravel of our driveway we heard the ambulance some fifteen minutes later, but it didn't stop at our gates. It carried on to the hospital that called it. It was another ten minutes before it rolled into our house, after a cursory and completely unnecessary detour. The drivers were, however, remarkable. They piled us in and sped off to a nearby private hospital. I'll save you the drama of the ride, but suffice it to say, I've never been in a faster car in my life.

As we rolled our friend into the hospital on a stretcher she was given a once over by the ER doctor who ordered an X-ray. But first we had to pay. I was given a slip and told to fork the money over (Rs. 850) before any care would be administered. After a receipt had been provided and the X-ray results had come back, the doctor -- again, a very kind man working into the late hours of the night -- told me that our friend would need a cast for her leg injury. He then handed me another sheet of paper. It was a list: three bandages, four cases of plaster of Paris, one painkiller, and one syringe. What a thorough hospital I thought! No, it was another payment request. I was marched off to the pharmacy to buy the material to make the cast and sedate our friend (total Rs.760). When I returned with the goods the cast was put on and I was summoned over to an admin desk. Before discharging our friend I was made to fill out a form with her details and then I was given another payment slip. It was here that I wished I was imagining it all. We were charged for the use of a stretcher for one hour (Rs. 100) and the rental of the X-ray slab which our friend's foot rested upon (Rs. 200).

What would have happened, nice doctors and all, had we been unable to pay? I'll tell you. We would have been marched out of the friendly hospital and put out on the streets. Healthcare in Pakistan is only for those who can afford it – the rich. It is a luxury item, like designer shoes or sunglasses, not a universal right. Government hospitals are in no better state; they are overcrowded, understaffed and under equipped to deal with the masses of people who require their care. There is no free access to medicine and no decent medical awareness programs.

Essentially, if you're an ordinary Pakistani faced with a medical emergency, you're as good as dead (I should add here that our ambulance ride set us back another Rs. 500).

If we were Cuban, however, the story would be entirely different. The Cuban government operates a national healthcare system that assumes all financial and administrative responsibility for its people. There are no private clinics, there don't need to be. The country runs close to three hundred hospitals, thirteen medical research centres, 450 twenty four hour clinics, and has approximately 14,000 working family doctors. The Cuban healthcare system, said to have been founded by Che Guevara, a doctor by profession, works -- and brilliantly so -- on one founding principle: no matter what happens in the country, no matter how sadistic the embargo, cuts from the nation's medical budget are categorically forbidden. In 2003 a government official told the World Press organization "You want to know where the billions of dollars we receive from foreign tourists go? You think they go towards uniforms or weaponry? Take a look at our hospitals, clinics and rehabilitation centres and you will find the answer there. Exactly half the currency earned in our country goes towards the health care system and it is our policy to spare no expense for that purpose".

The facts are proof of Cuba's radical healthcare provisions. According to the World Health Organization Cuba provides a doctor for every 170 residents, the second highest doctor to patient ratio in the world, after Italy. There are 350,000 medical personnel serving a population of approximately 11 million. Cuba has the lowest infant mortality rate in the Americas and one of the highest life expectancies in Latin America. It also has one of the lowest HIV rates in the world, partly owing to its stellar educational system (100% literacy, beat that USA). On average, Cubans who do pay for additional medical care -- and the need is negligible -- pay \$251 per annum. Compare that with the \$5,711 spent per year on health care by the average American whose country's healthcare system rivals Pakistan's in its utter stinginess and lack of human care.

It's not just at home that the Cuban healthcare system serves the people, but abroad too. Cuba has 25,000 of its doctors working outside the country, mostly with the dispossessed across the developing world. Since the nuclear explosion at Chernobyl in 1986, more than 20,000 children from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine have been treated in Cuba free of cost. They didn't pay a single penny. Nearly 2,000 Cuban doctors are stationed in Africa and thousands more travelled to South East Asia after the Tsunami and to Pakistan after the 2005 earthquake. The Cuban doctors who came to care for the earthquake victims were the last of the international healthcare workers to leave Pakistan and only after they had treated close to two million of our people. At the embarrassing donor conference held in Islamabad one month after the earthquake where the Presi-General and the PM held court like auctioneers demanding millions of dollars for the President's Relief Fund, the Cuban envoy stood up and spoke with the full weight of his country behind him. "We are not a rich country and we cannot afford to offer you millions like those of the Western world can" he said, then held up his hands "but we have these. And we will send you our doctors and we will treat the victims of the earthquake for as long as you need us". And they did.

If you think I'm biased – some of you have hinted that I tend to rave about unpopular countries– then have a look at what some of Cuba's usual detractors have to say. Kofi Annan, traditionally not one to stray from the US line of thought, said in 2000 that "Cuba demonstrates how much

nations can do with the resources they have if they focus on the right priorities - health, education, and literacy". The purveyors of economic evil the world over were no less generous in their praise. Former president of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, commended Cuba in 2001 for having done a "great job" on education and health. Even the head of the US Interests Section in Havana applauded Cubans for their "incredible dedication to healthcare".

The Cuban healthcare system is an example for the world. It is one country where basic human rights are met, where healthcare and education are not for the wealthy alone but for rich and poor alike. Further proof, in my humble opinion, that our rat race to compete with neo liberal economies is a meaningless one. Let's not forget that for all the bridges and fountains and restaurants and inflow of foreign capital that Karachi has seen in the last five years, this is a city in which MidEast Hospital was demolished to make way for a shopping mall.