



## ORIGINAL ARTICLES

### Nursing Care in Pinar del Río: participation in International missions from 1970 to 1997

#### La Enfermería pinareña en el internacionalismo cubano 1970-1997

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#### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** a characteristic that distinguishes the Cuban Revolution is the international solidarity that has been materialized in various sectors of society, including health system.

**Objective:** to witness the historical evolution of the nursing care international work and its distinctiveness in Pinar del Río from 1972 to 1997.

**Methods:** an intentional sample of 42 nurses was chosen, those who completed international missions during the chosen period, dialectical and historical methods were applied to carry out the research through testimonies. A questionnaire was completed to collect information from the selected participants on the type of mission, time, country and most relevant experiences during their work abroad.

**Results:** it was found that in Pinar del Río, women prevailed, who without even being graduate nurses, cured the wounded and cared for the sick with the delicacy proper to



women. In the period analyzed, many nurses from Pinar del Río offered their assistance in countries of Africa, Asia and America in difficult conditions due to war conflicts and natural disasters.

**Conclusions:** international nursing care missions in Pinar del Río were present in all historical moments from the wars of independence to the present with a memorable and outstanding participation, which should be incorporated into the teaching and social modalities as a promotion of the humanistic values of the Revolution.

**MeHS:** HISTORY; HISTORY OF NURSING; HUMAN RESOURCES; EVOLUTION; CUBA.

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## RESUMEN

**Introducción:** una característica que distingue a la Revolución Cubana es la solidaridad internacional que se ha materializado en diversos sectores de la sociedad, la salud entre estos.

**Objetivo:** testimoniar la evolución histórica del internacionalismo en Enfermería y sus particularidades en Pinar del Río de 1972 a 1997.

**Métodos:** se seleccionó una muestra intencional de 42 enfermeras y enfermeros que cumplieron misión internacionalista en el período de elección utilizando para la investigación el método dialéctico y el histórico mediante testimonios. Se elaboró un cuestionario para la recolección de información de los participantes seleccionados sobre tipo de misión, tiempo, país y vivencias más relevantes durante su desarrollo.

**Resultados:** se constató que, en Pinar del Río, se destacaron mujeres que, sin ser enfermeras, curaban heridos y atendieron enfermos con la delicadeza propia de la mujer. En la etapa analizada muchos enfermeros pinareños, brindaron su ayuda solidaria en países de África, Asia y América en difíciles condiciones por conflictos bélicos y desastres naturales.

**Conclusiones:** el internacionalismo en la Enfermería pinareña estuvo presente en todos los momentos históricos desde las guerras de independencia hasta la actualidad con una memorable y destacada participación, que debiera incorporarse a las modalidades docentes y sociales como promoción de los valores humanísticos de la Revolución.

**DeCS:** HISTORIA; HISTORIA DE LA ENFERMERÍA; RECURSOS HUMANOS; EVOLUCION; CUBA.

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## INTRODUCTION

Solidarity is defined as the bond that unites men and peoples in such a way that the welfare of one determines the one of the others, action to the cause of others; and internationalism as the doctrine that puts supranational interests before national interests. <sup>(1)</sup>

*"To be an internationalist is to pay off our own debt to humanity, whoever is not able to fight for others will not be able to fight for himself"*, pronouncement by the historical leader of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro Ruz.<sup>(2)</sup>

In Cuban society, solidarity and internationalism are part of the system of objective values, of conscience and instituted values that are reflected in everyday life, as well as of the patriotic and revolutionary traditions that identify the nation.<sup>(3)</sup>

Since the beginning of the revolutionary triumph, solidarity with other countries has increased in Cuba. A few years after the revolutionary triumph, Cuba began to offer internationalist aid, even without economic strengthening and total political consolidation. <sup>(4)</sup>

Cuban cooperation began in the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria in 1963, in that time liberated from French colonialism, 58 professionals were sent to help that young nation to face the health crisis after the war.<sup>(5)</sup>

Throughout its history, the Cuban people has had demonstrations of solidarity with other nations of the world, demonstrated since the beginning of the revolutionary triumph, legacies of the Latin Americanism thought of José Martí, Ernesto *Che* Guevara and Fidel Castro Ruz. The continuity of these ideas by the Historical Leader of the Revolution during all these years has been an expression of the internationalist principle of the Cuban people, which manifested itself in different figures and ways, as examples were the technical consultancies in numerous spheres of both science and economy, whether in the construction, exploitation and development of industries, agriculture, livestock, poultry farming, fishing, sugar, education, transportation, communications and health <sup>(6)</sup>.

The development and evolution of medical assistance has gone through different stages, conditioned by external and internal factors or both, which have had repercussions in the national context.

Its evolution over decades could be explained in stages such as the one that began in the 60s of the last century, with the beginning of cooperation in the medical international mission modality, based on the principle of free solidarity aid and which was strengthened by the different movements of independence that developed in Africa and Central America, similar behavior in the 70s and 80s. Some examples of countries where Cuban cooperation in this modality took place were: Algeria, Angola, Ethiopia and Nicaragua. <sup>(2)</sup>

At present, thousands of workers in the health sector have offered a solidarity contribution, among which are the Nursing Professionals, who are characterized by providing care the 24 hours a day to meet the health needs of those who suffer, anywhere on the planet where their indispensable participation has been requested.

The nurses of Pinar del Río have been present in all the historical moments of the Cuban international medical collaboration.

To carry out this descriptive and cross-sectional research, a sample of 42 nurses was intentionally chosen, who had completed an international mission in the chosen period, and to whom a survey was applied that included: country where the mission took place, type of mission or collaboration, length, activity carried out and main experiences lived during the course of the same.

Documents existing in the archives that preserve historical documentation in the province <sup>(7)</sup> and records of the department of provincial medical collaboration were reviewed using the <sup>(8)</sup> historical method and the dialectic one for its foundation.

The objective is to describe the historical background of international missions and cooperation of Cuban nursing specialty and in particular in the province of Pinar del Río, during the period 1970-1997.

## DEVELOPMENT

### Historical Background of International Nursing Care



Florence Nightingale en la Guerra de Crimea. 1854.

The historical background of Nursing Care in solidarity aid go back to Florence Nightingale born in Italy, daughter of English parents, who in 1854 received the Minister of War Sidney Herbert and with a group of 38 volunteers left for Turkey, for the Crimean War, where England and Russia fought and assisted English soldiers.

This work allowed a reduction of the mortality rate of the English from 42 to 20%. She worked tirelessly with scarce resources for the care and relief of the sick and wounded, faced a dreadful situation under very difficult circumstances, without sparing anything giving herself entirely to the work of Nursing Care day and night. The soldiers admired her as the guardian angel, she was known as the lady of the lamp.

This nurse established the modern system for the practical teaching of Nursing Care and is recognized as the author of the organization of civil and military hospitals, she died at the age of 90. She is considered and remembered for being the matriarch of modern Nursing Care. <sup>(9)</sup>

In Cuba, international solidarity is advocated, not as a spontaneous discourse or expression, but in accordance with principles planned and put into practice in all sectors of society. <sup>(10)</sup> The struggles for independence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were the scenes of the Cuban woman's performance, the example of Mariana Grajales Coello, a dignified mixed-race woman and mother who loved much and raised each of her sons and daughters so that they would be free and if necessary die for that purpose and for the homeland that made everyone swear before a crucifix and herself.

Mariana comes to us in images where the fade of the years is appreciated, but behind there is the young woman who knew the hostility to her race where they forged their love for freedom. She learned to read and write and that made her freer and allowed her to do more in her noble struggle. During the Great War she worked in the blood hospitals of the Independence Army. She cured the wounded Cubans and Spaniards. When her husband fell for Cuba's honor, he did not have her by his side. She repaired the soldiers' clothes, moved weapons and ammunition. She gave advice and encouragement to the Mambises for victory.

With more than 50 years of age he marched to the forests together with her children all with the conviction that first life was the Freedom and the Homeland. In 1878 she went into exile

in Jamaica and despite the vicissitudes, her home was always a meeting place for Cubans and contributed to the foundation of patriotic associations.

There are many similar examples of Cuban mothers and internationalists fill up the history from then until now. She, in a natural way, with the deserved recognition of Mother of the Fatherland, through her example, calls all of us permanently.

In Pinar del Río, Isabel Rubio Díaz, an illustrious patriot born in Guane, July 8, 1837, stood out. She knew how to fight bravely as well as to cure the wounded and sick with the delicacy of a woman in her humble blood hospitals. The Seborucal was the last one located in the municipality of Los Palacios. When she had no material to heal the wounded, he tore her clothes and used the strips as bandages; Maceo conferred on her the rank of Captain of the Health Corps of the Independence Army because of her heroism. Her extraordinary patriotic work was crowned with her death as a consequence of the wounds received by the Spanish guerrilla of San Diego on February 15, 1898, while she tried to protect the wounded and sick with her body.

Other women that also performed a heroic work in the redeeming forests were Catalina Valdés Soa, Adela Azcuy Labrador, Regla Socarás Socarrás, María Luz Noriega Hernández. Cited by the doctors of medicine: Marco Antonio Montano Diaz, Pedro Alexis Diaz Rodriguez in their article: The "mambisas" captain nurses of Pinar del Río. <sup>(11)</sup>

Since 1959 with the triumph of the Revolution in Cuba, there has been a high sensitivity for health, fulfilling one of the Moncada Programs. This concern has been accompanied by an ethic of solidarity help and cooperation with the poorest and neediest countries, always bearing in mind the ideas of the Historical Leader of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro Ruz. <sup>(12)</sup>

### **Pinar del Río Nursing in internationalism. Stage 1970-1997**

The stage was characterized by armed conflict situations. The nurses from Pinar del Río worked as civilians or military personnel in assistance functions, teaching or both, showing the continuity of the solidarity manifested by the Cuban people throughout the history.



Leocadia y Segundo, Yemen del Sur, 1972



Isabel Rubio Diaz

In 1972 the first two nurses from Pinar del Río left to carry out an internationalist mission in South Yemen: Segundo Cecilio González Reyes as an anesthetic nurse and Leocadia Betancourt Márquez as a general nurse, both faced the care of Yemeni patients in difficult conditions and in spite of this they fulfilled the mission satisfactorily and later fulfilled two other missions abroad. Segundo in South Yemen as an anesthetist from 1987 to 1990 period and in São-Tomé and Príncipe from 1996 to 1999 as the head of the anesthesia services. Leocadia went to Jamaica in another nursing care mission abroad from 1999 to 2003, and to Zimbabwe from 2008 to 2010. They testify that in these missions they worked in outpatient

clinics, operating rooms, medical wards with the wisdom and affection of Cuban Health Professionals cooperators, in dissimilar and sometimes very painful circumstances. Both are graduates as Bachelor of Science in Nursing, currently retired. They both were relieved by Miguel Solana Piñeiro, nurse anesthetist who continued the task as genuine bearer of the humanism of the Cuban Revolution. Later Solana completed three other missions in Iraq 1976-1977, Ghana 1999-2001 and São Tomé and Príncipe 2003-2005. According to his testimony in Iraq and Yemen was impressed by the bombings, since they caused many deaths and mutilated people that they had to receive and assist too. He has been retired for seven years already.

In 1973, Jesús Nogueira Parra, a nurse from Pinar del Río, leaves for Syria, a sovereign country on the eastern Mediterranean coast, to fulfill the honorable duty of internationalism with his wisdom and great experience in the assistant and care of burned patients and other services of his altruistic profession. In spite of the differences in habits and customs of the population of the Arab country, his wide professional experience guaranteed him to fulfill the mission with satisfaction. He died several years ago.

Laos, or Lao People's Democratic Republic, is a sovereign state located in the interior of the Indochina peninsula in Southeast Asia. In 1975 this country receives Rosario de la Torre Díaz, for an entire year in the Vietsay Freedom Front at "*Hospital Amistad Cuba Vietnam and Laos*", placed inside a cave. She let us know that this, together with the fact of having to go through rice fields at night where there were snakes, was the fact that impressed her the most, in spite of the limitations with the language she healed wounded, administered medicines, guided measures for the protection of the population's health and she managed to be respected and loved by all. She fulfilled her mission and returned to her homeland with excellent evaluation. Years later she would be trained as a graduate of Bachelor of Science in Nursing and for several years she was the municipal head of nursing care in La Palma. She is currently retired.



Rosario de la Torres Díaz

That same year, Teresa Sánchez Santana and Julio Pérez García, nurses who were dedicated to providing nursing care in the Orthopedic and Medical Services, left for Algeria at any time of the day or night. Julio died in that country when he was in his mission; Teresa returns to Cuba with a wide labor trajectory and occupies assistance and administrative functions as Bachelor in Nursing Care. She died several years ago.

Libya, a sovereign country in North Africa, located in the Maghreb. Its capital is Tripoli; it was another of the countries that received nurses from Pinar del Río to provide care to the most needy population. Among them, María del Carmen Álvarez Lucena (the Galician) general nurse who stood out for providing care to poly-traumatized and injured patients in the surgical services. She studied Bachelor degree in Nursing Care and for many years worked as a Head Nurse at Abel Santamaría Cuadrado Hospital in the province. She was not

retired when she died; she was working as a nurse in the epidemiology service of the hospital.

Angola gained its independence from Portugal in 1975, after a long war. However, once emancipated, the new country was immersed in an intense and prolonged civil war that lasted from 1975 to 2000.

During this period of war, many nurses from Pinar del Río participated along with Cuban and Angolan fighters. Among their works was to provide care to the sick and wounded in difficult conditions in the middle of the war. In such an anguished situation, parasitism, tuberculosis, malaria and other evils of a similar nature slanted hundreds of lives. During 1976-77, in Benguela province, Lobito Central Hospital, Nora Pérez Vélez participated as a general nurse, Flérida Catalá Rodríguez and José Fernández Puentes, as anesthetic nurses and Ana Romero Sánchez, as a pediatric nurse. They were trained as Graduates in Bachelor of Science in Nursing. All of them retired, José Fernández Puentes died after his retirement.

In the period 1977-78 in other provinces of the same country, Gladys Armenteros Herrera, María García Puebla, Dania Díaz Díaz and Gisela Herrera Cruz, faced the difficult task of curing the wounded and sick in the midst of war. All of them returned to their homeland with their duties accomplished. When they returned, they studied Bachelor degree in Nursing. Gisela died, and the rest are retired.

In the 80's another group continued the nursing assistance in Angola, it became necessary to train nursing assistants because of the lack of personnel, to meet the health care needs of the population broken by disease and accentuated by the repercussion of war, defecation in the open air and marked psychological affectations. The school of Nursing of Lubango, received the professor Verónica Nieto González, BScN who together with her students, who needed differentiated attention for the loss of their loved ones, their sadness and desperation made the task of training them as nurse assistants very difficult. But she faced that situation with love, and dedication to the teaching of Nursing in theory and practice, and together with an Angolan professor graduated the students prepared to face the task and satisfy the needs of the population regarding health care.

Another country involved in the guerrilla struggle against the Somoza dictatorship was Nicaragua, where Francisca Caridad Torres García, Esperanza Suárez Pérez, Medardo Rodríguez Lazo, Ada Tomasa Ceballo Gato, Mirtha Hernández Moreno, and Lucrecia Rivero Cairo worked in partnership under very difficult conditions in 1984. These nurses learned of the horrors of caring for patients in times of conflict. All of them accomplishing their duties in different assistance and teaching units. Medardo, Doctor of Medicine, and the rest graduated from Nursing Care degree.

In the period from 1985-91 after the prolongation of the civil war in Angola, other nurses from Pinar del Río attended wounded soldiers and civilians, sick population and those who suffered from physical and psychological sequels, in addition they occasionally assisted women in labor: Bertha Margarita Lorenzo Velázquez, Francisca Caridad Torres García and Eunice Echevarría Cabrera, who had the experience of participating in a triplet birth where, in spite of the difficult and poor conditions in the place, they were born healthy. Today, they have higher degrees in Nursing, associate professors and degrees of masters, all of them work at Simón Bolívar Teaching Unit affiliate to Dr. Ernesto Guevara de la Serna School of Medical Sciences. Teresa Vera Castillo, Aymara Rivera Pérez, are retired nurses and Maritza Morejón Rivera, Bachelor of Science in Nursing who works at Raúl Sánchez Polyclinic, Pinar del Río.

Ethiopia was another victim of a heartbreaking war. Delfina Hernández Breijo, Zenaida Rodríguez Rodríguez, these two graduates in Nursing work at Abel Santamaría Cuadrado and León Cuervo Rubio Hospitals; Mercedes Pedroso Romero nurse technician and Ana Celia Fernández Moreno, who has de degree in Nursing, are retired.

Numerous testimonies of this stage can be heard. The testimony of Delfina Hernandez Breijo can be read.



Photos of the book "Trabajar por la vida" (Working for life) - Editorial José Martí, 1983 (13)

*"... in the month of October 1977, I arrived in the brother country of Ethiopia as a health professional in the specialty of nursing care to accomplish an international mission at the age of 21; there I faced very difficult moments. At the beginning I worked in the military hospital that provided assistance to the poor, I had a very impressive experience: to see a girl isolated in a room with rabies and its horrible manifestations without solution until the death, in all of the areas of the hospital there were only two doctors and the nursing care was performed by the qualified personnel of the country.*

*... within the two months of my mission, there was a military aggression in Ethiopia through Somalia, a country bordering the North. The majority of the coworkers were designated to integrate a military mission as medical assistance, at the beginning we were only six nurses in the hospital from the fighting front, with the green olive uniform, rifle, canteen and backpack in hand, we arrived in helicopter to Alenmaya to a Forest University located in the field, under the tension of the initiated war and in a few hours we transformed that educational center into a hospital. With the arrival of many wounded, we dedicated ourselves to carry out the procedures of Nursing with minimum conditions of resources. The wounds were fetid because of the days of transits and the time without curing. The wounded were placed on the first floor until we organized the three floors of the hospital....*

*...the work schedules were continuous, without relief, there was very little staff, food was difficult for both patients and for us, but the willingness to care for those wounded did not allow us to overcome fatigue. Those were days of great tension, with the threat of bombing the hospital base, later other Cuban health workers joined, which alleviated the physical exhaustion. At that stage I was appointed head of the Nursing Staff and secretary of the Base Committee of the Young Communist League. After the aggression ended, the third month after we found ourselves in that war situation, we received a visit from our commander Fidel Castro Ruz; I was appointed with another nurse for the ambulance that would participate in the expedition. In Harar, where the cemetery where the Cuban brothers who had fallen in combat were buried and whom our commander Fidel Castro wanted to attend, was the place of the meeting, we were impressed by Fidel's repeated embrace, his military salutation before each grave and the phrase: "you are our Marianas.*

... Then he went to the house where all the brigade lived and to the hospital where the wounded Cubans and Ethiopians were; there was a moment of his visit when he sat on the floor while we made a circle around him and we saw the great father moved because he cared about our food, communication with the family, relationships with the Ethiopians, language difficulties. Moments that will remain in my memory throughout my life, these are unforgettable memories. We also had the privilege of having the visit of Raúl Castro Ruz, Army Brigadier General where he considered the successful completion of the military mission, which is why we were decorated upon arrival in the homeland in a solemn act in the Cacahual, with the medal of Second Class Combatant". <sup>(14)</sup>

The distribution of the interviewees by countries where the mission was accomplished by 42 nurses the largest number attended Angola and Nicaragua. (Table 1)

**Table 1-** Distribution of nursing-care cooperating partners by countries, Pinar del Río 1970-1997 (Source of information: interview)

Countries	Nº	%
 Argelia	4	9.5
 South Yemen	3	7.1
 Laos	1	2.3
 Syria	1	2.3
 Libya	1	2.3
 Etiopía	3	7.1
 Iraq	4	9.5
 Nicaragua	9	21.4
 Angola	16	38.5
<b>Total 10</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100</b>

## CONCLUSIONS

Internationalism in Pinar del Río Nursing Care has been present in all historical moments, from the wars of independence to the present. In each of them, the humanism, tenacity and willpower to all proofs, in the satisfaction of the health needs of the populations affected by health problems or other events of the nature, was manifested. A greater participation was achieved in the period between 1972 and 1997 characterized by armed conflicts. The ideology of the Commander in Chief was always present in the development of each and every one of the procedures carried out by these health workers, in every place where their missions abroad were assigned, until they were accomplished, these nurses proudly testified for the new generations can count on the indelible memory of the completion of their duty.

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### **Conflict of interests**

The authors state that there are no conflicts of interest of any kind in the investigation, testimony and article writing.

### **Contribution of the authors**

The authors contributed equally to the design of the study.

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