

## Guevara's legacy

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Article

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TO understand current advances in biomedical sciences in Cuba, it is useful to trace back the thoughts of some of the early architects of the nation. One of them was Ernesto Che Guevara (1928-1967).

Thirty-six years ago - more specifically, at 1.10pm on Oct 9, Guevara was murdered in Bolivia. It was one of the saddest moments in Cuban history. His remains were only discovered six years ago, in Vallegrande, Bolivia, and repatriated to Cuba. That Guevara was also a qualified medical doctor made it even more poignant. Indeed it was his medical training that turned him into a committed revolutionary.

Perhaps his speech entitled *On Revolutionary Medicine*, delivered in 1960, a year after the downfall of the former regime, will help us to understand what changes the man and his profound thoughts brought to the future of medicine and medical research in Cuba.

Like some aspiring youngsters, Guevara dreamed of becoming a famous medical research scientist. He dreamed of working indefatigably to discover something which could help his community. He was keen to research allergies and asthma, and some of his efforts were highly regarded. As though he could not wait to serve, Guevara, while studying medicine, managed to get a licence to work as a male nurse for the municipal health services. Later on, he was employed on Argentinean state-owned merchant ships and oil tankers.

Guevara also took time to travel extensively, especially throughout Latin America, bringing him in close contact with poverty, hunger and disease. He faced obstacles such as the inability to treat a child because of lack of money; and the stupefaction provoked by continual hunger and punishment. He soon realised that there were things that were just as important as becoming a famous scientist or making a significant contribution to medical science.

He categorically stated: "I wanted to help those people." He articulated that the life of a single human being was worth a million times more than all the property of the richest man on Earth. Far more important than a good remuneration was the pride of serving one's neighbour. Much more definitive and much more lasting than all the gold that one could accumulate was the gratitude of the people.

To Guevara, the people were a great source of wisdom, and we should have the enquiring mind and humble spirit to learn from them. It was this understanding that made Guevara question the basic concept attached to medicine - that it was an elitist pursuit. He argued for erasing old concepts in promoting good health among the people.

"Often we need to change our concept, not only the general concepts, the social or philosophical ones, but also medical concepts. We should not go to the people and say, 'Here we are. We come to give you the charity of our presence, to teach you our science, to show you your errors, your lack of culture, your ignorance of elementary things,' he said.

Guevara initially read engineering at the University of Buenos Aires. At the same time, he wanted to enrol in the Argentinean military service but was declared unfit due to his asthma. In 1947, after the death of his grandmother with whom he lived, he made the switch to medicine, a move that eventually made him more famous than he could ever imagined.

As a medical student, apart from spending long hours studying in the library, he was also athletic. Despite his asthmatic condition, he played football, rugby and swims. He was also fond of literature, painting, chess and photography. He graduated as a medical doctor in 1953 from the University of Buenos Aires.

Upon graduation, he worked on allergies and presented papers in medical congresses. In December the same year, he was offered a post as professor of physiology. Earlier in July, while working at the General Hospital in Mexico, he met Fidel Castro Ruz, and already knew the latter's work on Cuba titled *History Will Absolve Me*.

Castro reportedly recalled that Guevara was a great talent, "a great intelligence, with a great theoretical capacity". Their "comradeship" developed and Guevara later earned the pet name Che, a term of endearment given to him as a sign of fondness and respect for his unreserving sacrifice for Cuba and its people, indeed that of the colonised world.

Guevara, an Argentinian from a middle-class family, gave it up to join Castro to put some of his convictions into practice. On Jan 14, 1959, two weeks after the successful revolution, Guevara was declared Cuban honorary physician by the National Medical College of Cuba. He was Castro's right-hand man and credited with many achievements - such as starting schools, hospitals, a newspaper and organising the early post-revolutionary economy as Minister for Industry - between 1961 and 1965.

Guevara's philosophy was: life is not a matter of how many kilogrammes of meat one has to eat, neither is it of how many times a year someone can go to the beach, nor how many pretty things from abroad one might be able to buy with present-day wages. It is a matter of making the individual feel more complete with internal richness and responsibility.

It is not surprising then, given the confusion in today's world, more than three decades after Guevara's demise, that his approach to life and humanity through the development of science and medicine in Cuba now takes centre stage. Regardless of whether one agrees with this brand of politics, it is quite clear that his convictions and dedication as a revolutionary doctor demonstrated the incredible power of pursuing a mission in one's life, as pointed out in the synopsis of the book, *Che for Beginners*, by S.Sinay and M.A. Scenna (1997).

This is a pertinent point since there are too many people today who try to believe in some form of noble mission without the same level of conviction, dedication and sacrifice, as Guevara did.

In the practice of biomedical sciences, this could spell disaster. Increasingly, it is difficult to find someone with the level of commitment close to that of the revolutionary doctor.

Castro confided nine days after the death of Guevara that the latter had another quality that many are not aware of today - he had an extraordinary heart which made him an extraordinary human and an extraordinarily sensitive man!

To this, we may add the words of Guevara's daughter Aleida Guevara March, who is a well-known paediatrician: "He always put the needs of the group first, and then, much later, his own. We keep the memory of people like him alive because it helps us to be better human beings."

Indeed, these are some of the values that characterise the Cuban biomedical science and technology today to enable it to blossom the way it did for the benefit of humanity.

The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He visited Cuba recently to initiate scientific collaboration with Cuban research institutes.

NOTE: The USM-ABN AMRO Art and Cultural Centre at Beach Street, Penang is currently holding a Cuban Prints Exhibition. Admission is free.

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