

Editorial

The Bitter Fruit of Socialism: Health Crisis in Venezuela

Lawrence R. Huntoon, M.D., Ph.D.

The bitter fruit of socialism was recently exposed on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*: “Venezuela Is Starving.” Hobbled by economic policies, Latin America’s once-richest country can no longer feed its people.¹

The *Journal* also reported that inflation in Venezuela is estimated to reach 720 percent in 2017, making it very difficult for ordinary people to make ends meet. People rummage through dumpsters hoping to find a few scraps of food to sustain them. Inflation is the invisible thief that robs the country’s people.

Venezuelan officials are fond of boasting about their universal health care system, under which all people allegedly have “guaranteed access to treat all their illnesses.”² Socialist policies, including price controls and currency exchange rules, however, have led to severe shortages of food, medicine, and medical supplies.

Although socialists always try to defy human nature and basic economic principles in imposing supposedly beneficent policies, price controls always result in shortages. The “beneficiaries” of egalitarian socialist policies are always the ones who suffer, while the socialist elites live a life of wealth and comfort. Markedly lower oil prices have also contributed to the humanitarian catastrophe in Venezuela.

Severe Shortages of Medicine and Medical Supplies

Venezuela’s medical system suffers from a chronic shortage of basic medicines and medical supplies, including antibiotics, anticonvulsants, muscle relaxers, pain medications, anesthetics, IV fluids, needles, catheters, isopropyl alcohol, scalpels, nebulizers, sterile gloves, gauze, sutures, antiseptics, and bleach.^{2,3} Air conditioning and elevators in hospitals often do not work.⁴

When patients go to the hospital, they are expected to bring their own medicines and medical supplies needed to treat them. But due to government price controls on medications and currency exchange policies, pharmacies have severe shortages of medications. There often is no medicine available to purchase. A survey of physicians in August of 2016 found that 76 percent of public hospitals lack the basic medications to treat patients.² Patients hunt from pharmacy to pharmacy looking for medications they need. But when the pharmacies lack the medications, patients turn to the black market where prices are high and there is no guarantee of quality.³

In trauma wards, patients wait for six months or more to

have bones reset because there are no rods, pins, and plates available. Psychiatric wards lack psychiatric medications, so they resort to simply sedating patients, month after month, while psychiatric illnesses worsen. Hospitals do not have chemotherapy drugs to treat cancer patients, and patients die as a result, unless they are able to purchase their own chemotherapy drugs elsewhere. Surgery cannot be performed because of lack of anesthetic drugs. Surgeons may re-use surgical gloves due to a lack of supply of sterile gloves. There is also a lack of sterilization equipment to sterilize surgical instruments. Malnourished children linger in pediatric wards, where their parents beg for food, which the hospital is unable to provide. Patients often sleep in dirty beds in hospital corridors.⁴ According to an article published by *The Guardian*: “The Venezuelan Health Observatory, a research centre at the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas, estimates that fewer than 10% of operating theatres, emergency rooms and intensive care units are fully operational. It says 76% of hospitals suffer from scarcity of medicines, 81% have a lack of surgical materials, and 70% complain of intermittent water supply.”⁴

There is also a shortage of physicians and nurses in Venezuela. Physicians work for the equivalent of less than 12 cents per hour, and often end up taking money out of their own pockets to pay for medications their patients need. Approximately 9,000 physicians have fled the country, making the physician shortage even worse.⁴

The consequences of these shortages created by socialist policies are dire. The maternal mortality rate in 2016 was 130.7 per 100,000 births. The infant mortality rate in 2016 was 18.61 deaths per 1,000 live births. Many patients who have treatable conditions die. Patients also die while waiting for surgery.²

Severe Food Shortages

Government price controls on food have also led to severe shortages. When food becomes available in supermarkets, people wait in long lines, hoping that there will still be food left when they reach the front of the line.¹ Even toilet paper has been unavailable in grocery stores for months at a time.² Starvation is widespread in Venezuela. Nutritional diseases like kwashiorkor and marasmus affecting infants are not uncommon. Approximately 29 children die per day due to malnutrition.⁴

Repressive Socialist Government Retaliates against Those Who Protest Shortages

Much like sham peer review in which some hospitals retaliate and punish physician whistleblowers, the socialist Venezuelan government retaliates and punishes those who complain about the shortages of medicine and food. The socialist government, of course, blames others, including physicians, pharmacies, and pharmaceutical companies for the severe shortages, accusing them of acting to disrupt the system.

Physicians who complain about shortages of medicine and medical supplies, or who treat citizens injured by police while peacefully protesting food shortages, are often detained and questioned by police.³ Physicians who criticize the dismal state of affairs in the hospitals where they work are threatened by the government and are at risk of being fired.²

Starving people, who are peacefully protesting in the streets, are subject to arrest, detention, beatings, and torture by police. And, some protesters are prosecuted in military courts, depriving them of their right to a fair trial.²

A toxic environment has been created in hospitals. Physicians are sometimes mugged in the corridors, and threatened with death if they are not able to save a certain patient. Violent gangs sometimes enter the operating rooms and start shooting.⁴

Venezuelan Socialist Leaders Deny That Crisis Exists

Socialists never admit when socialism fails. They seek to maintain the lie that socialism can provide for all of the needs of the people and make them all equal. In Venezuela, the socialist government nationalized private farms, thinking the government could run them better and more equitably for the people, and now they are unable to produce enough food to feed their own people. Likewise, the socialist government

believed it could run medical care with price controls to make care more affordable and accessible for all, and now they are not able to provide for even basic medical needs for their own people. Escape from suffering in a socialist system is available only to the socialist elite in power, who typically deny that there is any problem.

"In June 2016, Foreign Affairs Minister Delcy Rodriguez told the Organization of American States' (OAS) Permanent Council: 'There is no humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. There is not. I say this with full responsibility: there is not.'"² Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro was quoted as saying: "I doubt there is anywhere in the world, with the exception of Cuba, with a better health system than this one."⁴

Conclusion

Socialism and Communism do not work.

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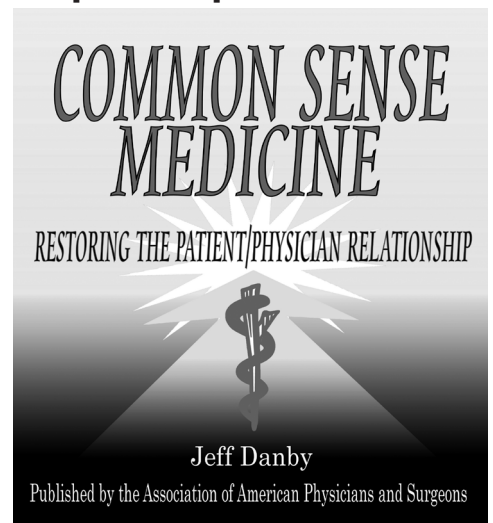
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