



Nº March 21,2014

Dr. Richard Horton
Editor
The Lancet

Dear Dr. Horton,

The Venezuelan National Academy of Medicine (VNAM) is an official corporation founded in 1904 by Organic Law to act as a the country's consulting body in all matters related to national medical science. As such, this organization is public, apolitical, scientific, and constitutes the most authoritative institution in the Venezuela to provide recommendations in medical science. We, as an institution, felt compelled to write this letter in response to an inaccurate and somewhat biased article by Ewan Robertson published on March 15, 2014, entitled "Venezuelan Unrest Increases Pressure on Health Services". Mr. Robertson stressed in his writing that the situation of social instability is affecting medical care, while the real origin of the problem is a catastrophic humanitarian health crisis due to erroneous and unconsulted planning.

The constitutional right to have access to healthcare is a fantasy in our country. Several medical corporations, including the VNAM, have alerted governmental authorities about the profound crisis to come as a result of the deplorable status of national healthcare in both public and private. We have never received a response from the authorities. The failure experienced by healthcare plans developed by the government for 14 years



cannot be disguised by official propaganda. There is clear evidence based on increasing values of health indicators such as maternal mortality rate and infant mortality rate, in particular the neonatal mortality rate, which reveal the poor quality of service to both mothers and newborn babies (Figures 1 and 2). Unfortunately, the data presented in the figures only cover up to year 2010, since the government stopped the disclosure of official statistics beyond that year. The lack of official preventative programs has allowed the resurgence of infectious diseases like malaria and dengue fever. A collapse of the primary, secondary, and tertiary public health services is affecting the demands of the people. The inventories of essential medications have been reduced by half. Patients do not receive the adequate treatment even if they attempt to pay out-of-pocket. The capabilities of the government to provide appropriate epidemiological monitoring have been significantly reduced, affecting the necessary response to new growing threats in healthcare.

Current healthcare indicators are significantly below the levels Venezuela had previously agreed to accomplish for the United Nations Millennium Goals in 2015. Patients with cancer visiting public centers are not receiving medical or surgical care, and most of them just die while waiting to receive treatment for their diseases. Chemotherapy medications are critically in shortage, which represents a death sentence for many of these individuals with cancer. Patients with HIV/AIDS or those with hematological disorders have been abandoned, as the blood banks are not receiving their stipulated funds from the government. Availability of donor blood has



reached critical levels, to the point where Venezuela would not be able to supply blood derivatives in case of a national emergency situation.

The government has also established a parallel health system (Barrio Adentro), which contributes to more fragmentation and segmentation of health care in the country.

However, all programs have been centralized and guided by the Cuban Medical Mission. This program is now showing signs of dramatic deterioration, and it has become incapable of providing enough coverage, operational resources, and quality of services despite the extraordinary amounts of income spent by the country during the past 15 years. This is the part of the story that Mr. Robertson disregarded in his article. We feel obliged to reply in order to provide your distinguished readers a more balanced view of the real suffering of the Venezuelan people.

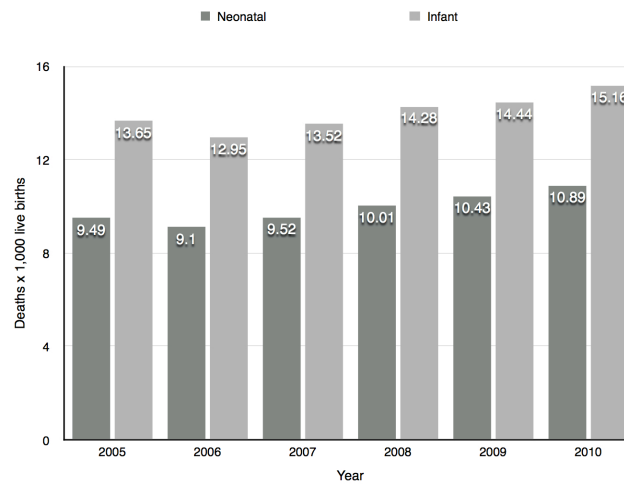
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Figure 1.

Figure 1
Neonatal and Infant Mortality Rates in Venezuela 2005-2010

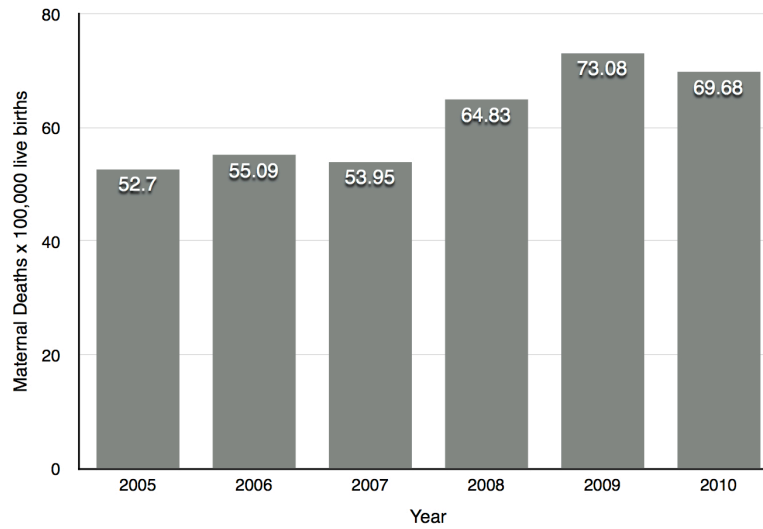


Source: Annual Report of Epidemiology and Vital Statistics, Ministry of People's Power for Health, Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

Figure 2.



Maternal Mortality Rates in Venezuela 2005-2010



Source: Annual Report of Epidemiology and Vital Statistics, Ministry of People's Power for Health, Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela