

Experience report on the International Physiotherapy study abroad programme in Cuba 2023/24

by Simon Stark



Lessons with teacher Julio and his physiotherapy students

Background:

After completing my physiotherapy training at a vocational college in 2014, I worked in practices specialising in orthopaedics for seven years and spent around 1 year on sabbatical in Spain in 2017, where I learned to speak fluent Spanish. I then completed the certificate in manual therapy according to Maitland and, with a growing interest in science and research, I started the part-time bachelor's degree in physiotherapy at Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences in autumn 2021.

Thanks to my background in manual therapy and my good knowledge of Spanish, Prof Christoff Zalpour immediately recruited me for the CubOsMT project - "Manual therapy in Cuba under intercultural aspects" (www.hs-osnabrueck.de/cubosmt/). After two short stays in Cuba in 2021 and 2022 as a project collaborator, discussions with the Cuban cooperation partners led to the first opportunity to spend a semester abroad at the faculty of the partner university in Havana. I switched to the "International Physiotherapy B.Sc." degree programme and then started my studies abroad in the winter semester of 2023/24, which would give me the opportunity to get to know physiotherapy in the Caribbean country first-hand.

Organisational matters:

I had to obtain a Spanish certificate in B1 and B2 via Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences by enrolling in the courses there, studying the material on my own and taking the exams online. International health insurance is compulsory for the stay and I took out this through my insurance company.

A visa is required to enter Cuba, which can be purchased as a tourist card and exchanged on site in Havana for an academic visa for the planned duration of the stay.

Funding for the stay would have been possible via the DAAD's PROMOS scholarship, for which you have to submit a letter of motivation and a letter of recommendation from a professor to the university's IFO. Fortunately, I was able to receive internal funding from the CubOsMT project, which

enabled me to receive longer funding. Another option would have been to apply for a grant ("Auslandsbafög") to study abroad.

I found accommodation via AirBnB near the faculty and later negotiated a more favourable price for the entire stay with the landlady on site.

A learning agreement was concluded with the partner university to ensure that the courses completed in Cuba were recognised at Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences.



Doctor's rounds for inpatients

Experiences in Havana:

One focus of my semester was to be on gaining practical experience working in the "Manuel Fajardo" hospital in the Vedado district, which specialises in neurological diseases such as ataxia, multiple sclerosis, and stroke, but also treats patients with neuromusculoskeletal diseases on the side.

There are three training options available to become a physiotherapist in Cuba: a 3-year training programme, a 5-year degree programme and a 5-year part-time study option for therapists who have already completed their training. The content of the training and the study programme is basically similar, although the training places a stronger focus on practical work.

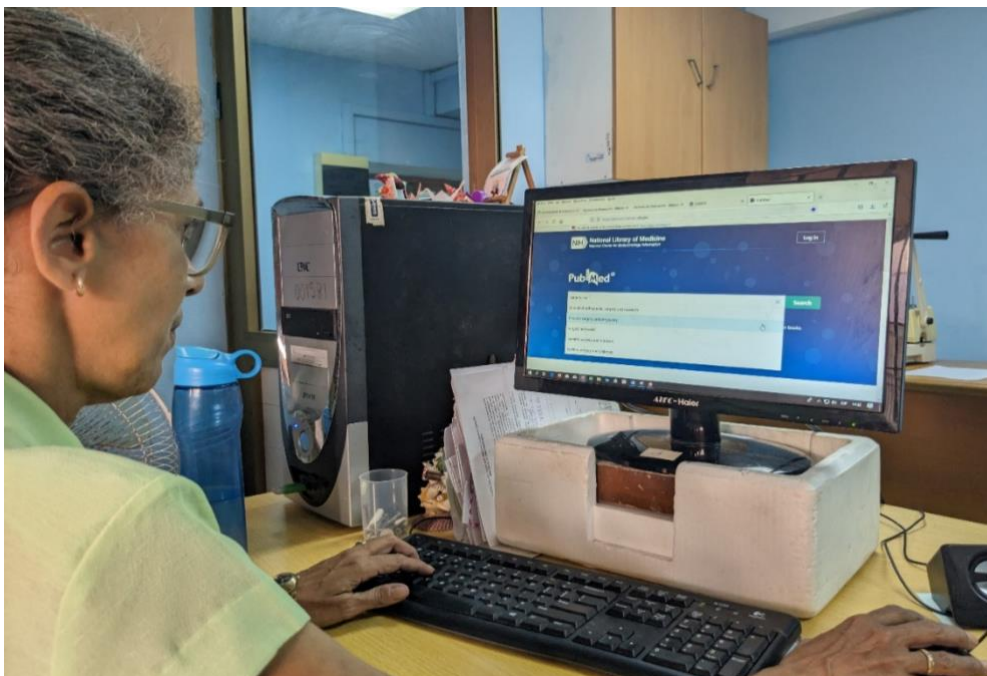
In contrast to the training programme, the degree programme provides advanced skills in the areas of administration, care, teaching, science, and research. Graduates of the degree programme also have access to postgraduate, master's and doctoral programmes. In theory, they supervise and manage the processes of the trained therapists, but in practice, both groups perform similar tasks. In Cuba, there is no direct access for patients, but they are sent to physiotherapy by referral from the doctor.

At the hospital, I was able to familiarise myself with how physiotherapy works in Cuba and became part of the team. A special feature of the system is that specialists in rehabilitation and physical therapy examine the patients, make diagnoses and determine the treatment goals and methods. These doctors work closely with the physiotherapists, who must adhere to the doctor's instructions but can consult with them at any time.



Lessons with Dra Flor and Mexican residents for rehabilitation medicine

Although the physiotherapists learn how to examine patients, they are not very skilled in practice, as the thorough subjective assessment and physical examination are mainly carried out by the rehabilitation physicians, who also have more clinical reasoning or differential diagnosis skills. In some cases, I noticed that a more structural way of thinking prevailed, which meant that imaging was quickly ordered. I was also aware of the patient management, which occasionally focused more on protection and avoidance of physical activity rather than active coping behaviour. Knowledge of (complex) pain mechanisms was mixed among the specialists.



Meeting with the faculty librarian

As in Germany, working according to evidence-based standards provided a mixed picture. Some therapists seemed to be more interested in this but described not having been prepared well enough for it during their studies. The faculty librarian gave me a competent impression when she explained the various databases available or mentioned the advanced search strategy with MeSH terms.



Instruction of physiotherapy students in electrotherapy by a graduate physiotherapist

In terms of the workflow in the hospital, it is important to understand that patients first go through the department for physical agents, are then treated passively/assistively/actively on the treatment bench, and finally do functional exercises in a gym on equipment, on the mat, on the walking or wall bars, among other things. Every three months, the employees rotate from one department to another, so they never work with a patient in all three areas on the same day.

For some doctors and therapists, the traditional use of passive physical therapy measures such as ultrasound, electrotherapy, heat therapy and hydrotherapy are very important. The therapists had first-class knowledge of the (German) electrotherapy devices and emphasised the usefulness of this application as a supplement and preparation for further (active) therapy.



Therapy in the gym

In the implementation of the therapy, I realised that the therapists work with passion and a lot of humanity. I found many patients to be very motivated and grateful. Although life is extremely complicated for large parts of the population, there was a great deal of friendliness, gratitude, and

helpfulness. The Cuban relaxed attitude, the humour and the many jokes that were made during the therapy were also very pleasant. The Cubans are real survivors and despite many adversities, they manage to make a lot out of a little with a good dose of improvisation.

As the state hospital lacks money for repairs or new equipment, there is a need to catch up in many areas, such as the defective air conditioning system, which makes work and therapy difficult, especially in the hot summer months.



Physical examination of a patient and treatment on the bench and in the sling cage

In addition to everyday life in the clinic, I also learnt about the healthcare system and the history of Cuba. The philosophy of the socialist country is to offer the population free access to education and healthcare. When Fidel Castro himself underwent rehabilitation after an accident in the early 2000s, he recognised its relevance for the healthcare of his population, which is also affected by a significant demographic shift towards an ageing population. Through a new national rehabilitation concept, the profession of physiotherapist was academized and many rehabilitation centres were established to take account of the importance of prevention and primary care.

It was very interesting for me to familiarise myself with this special healthcare system, which is unique in the world, and to compare it with the German system. I was also able to learn a lot of new things, especially about neurology, as I had mainly dealt with patients with neuromusculoskeletal diseases in the past. I was also inspired by the humour, the relaxed attitude, and the ability of the therapists to establish a good patient-therapist relationship. I was also pleased to see the Cuban physios' great interest in learning new things and that they would also like to examine and assess more in the future.



Activity organised by inpatients to celebrate World Physiotherapy Day