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# Health care in Venezuela

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After the Bolivarian Revolution, extensive inoculation programs and the availability of low- or no-cost health care provided by the Venezuelan Institute of Social Security made Venezuela's health care infrastructure one of the more advanced in Latin America. However, by 2015, the Venezuelan health care system had collapsed.<sup>[1][2]</sup>



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## History

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### Pre-Bolivarian Revolution

#### 1970s

Venezuelan state governments operated only 5 facilities in 1979, down from about 60 hospitals in 1970 since the Ministry of Health and Social Assistance (MSAS) took over many of the hospitals.<sup>[3]</sup>

In 1978, a presidential election year, medical sales in Venezuela hit an all-time high at the time and dropped in 1979. In 1979, there were approximately 250 hospitals in Venezuela with MSAS operating the majority of 58%. Venezuela had a shortage of medical professionals and hospital beds in the late 1970s due to highly increasing population and the lack of specializing in being a specific medical technician. The lack of both professionals and beds was higher in rural areas compared to more populated areas. Between 1978 and 1980, Venezuela had 14,771 doctors, 8,805 nurses and 28,04 nursing auxiliaries.<sup>[3]</sup>

#### 1980s

Under the Sixth National Plan of Luis Herrera Campins, the Campins government planned to increase medical funding by 9.7% annually between 1981 and 1985, with medical expenditures planned to reach \$2.1 billion in 1985. \$1.2 billion were designated to the construction of new facilities to combat bed shortages, with a main focus on establishing clinics

in order to avoid inefficiency of larger hospitals. Rehabilitation of handicapped individuals and the concentration on heart disease, the leading cause of death in Venezuela, were also focused on in the Sixth National Plan. Medical professionals in Venezuela were "extremely U.S. oriented", with most doctors attending post-graduate work in the United States, were able to speak English, read U.S. medical journals and attended gatherings of United States medical experts. In 1981, over 70% of healthcare services were government administered.<sup>[3]</sup>

Foreign medical equipment developed abroad was quickly adopted and shipped to Venezuela with most of the country's medical goods needing to be imported. In 1980, Venezuela imported 47% of medical goods from the United States, 13% from Germany, 8% from Japan and 3% from the United Kingdom. The majority of medical equipment was distributed by a conglomerate of about 45 distributors known as Asociacion Venezolana de Distribuidores de Equipos Medicos (AVEDEM) while 15% of medical products were distributed by smaller entities.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Bolivarian Revolution

Following the Bolivarian Revolution and the establishment of the Bolivarian government, initial healthcare practices were promising with the installation of free healthcare and the assistance received from Cuban medical professionals providing aid. The Bolivarian government's failure to concentrate on healthcare for Venezuelans, the reduction of healthcare spending and government corruption eventually affected medical practices in Venezuela; causing avoidable deaths along with an emigration of medical professionals to other countries.<sup>[4][5]</sup> Venezuela's reliance of imported goods and its complicated exchange rates initiated under Hugo Chávez led to increasing shortages during the late-2000s and into the 2010s that affected the availability of medicines and medical equipment in the country.<sup>[5]</sup>

### 2000s

Throughout Hugo Chávez's presidency, the Health Ministry changed ministers multiple times. According to a high-ranking official of Venezuela's Health Ministry, the ministers were treated as scapegoats whenever issues with public health arose in Venezuela.<sup>[5]</sup> The official also explained how Health Ministry officials would also perform illicit acts in order to enrich themselves by selling goods designated to public healthcare to others.<sup>[5]</sup>

### 2010s

The Venezuelan government stopped publishing medical statistics in 2010.<sup>[6]</sup>

In 2014 when Venezuela's economy was facing difficulties, Venezuela's medical atmosphere deteriorated. The Bolivarian government did not supply enough dollars for medical supplies among healthcare providers; with doctors saying that 9 of 10 of large hospitals had only 7% of required supplies with private doctors reporting many patients that are "impossible" to count are dying from easily treated illnesses due to the "downward sliding economy" in 2014.<sup>[6]</sup> Due to such complications, many Venezuelans died avoidable deaths with medical professionals having to use limited resources to use methods



Healthcare spending by percentage of Venezuela's GDP.

Source: World Bank (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.TOTL.ZS?page=3>)

that were replaced decades ago.<sup>[4]</sup> In February 2014, doctors at University of Caracas Medical Hospital stopped performing surgeries due to the lack of supplies, even though nearly 3,000 people require surgery.<sup>[7]</sup>

In March 2014, the executive director of the Venezuelan Association of Hospitals and Clinics explained how in less than a month, shortages of 53 medical products rose to 109 products and explained how the CADIVI system is to blame since 86% of supplies are imported<sup>[8]</sup> with private sector hospitals claiming they owe suppliers billions of dollars in order to pay for debts.<sup>[9]</sup>



Venezuelans protesting in 2017 for medicine due to the shortages in Venezuela

In early 2015, only 35% of hospital beds were available and 50% of operating rooms could not function due to the lack of resources.<sup>[4][5]</sup> In March 2015, a Venezuelan NGO, Red de Medicos por la Salud, reported that there was a 68% shortage of surgical supplies and a 70% shortage of medicines in Venezuelan pharmacies.<sup>[5]</sup> In May 2015, the Venezuelan Medical Federation said that 15,000 doctors had left the public health care system because of shortages of drugs and equipment and poor pay. In August 2015 Human Rights Watch said “We have rarely seen access to essential medicines deteriorate as quickly as it has in Venezuela except in war zones.” By the end of 2015, the Bolivarian government reported that of all Venezuelans visiting public hospitals in the year, one-of-three patients died.<sup>[10]</sup> Also in 2015 Venezuela had 30% of all reported malaria cases in the Americas and more even than Brazil, which has a much larger

population.<sup>[11]</sup>

In 2018 Venezuela is suffering from acute shortages of food and medicines.

## State and private

Private hospitals and clinics and the qualifications of their medical personnel are comparable to U.S. standards. Private health services are costly and "full to bursting." The Venezuelan government has accused private hospitals of profiteering. 2,000 doctors left the country between 2006 and 2008.<sup>[12]</sup> Overall roughly 1 in 5 Venezuelans have private health insurance.

## See also

- Mission Barrio Adentro
- Operación Milagro

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