

## Cuba–US Collaboration: The Pandemic Imperative

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It is unclear why we constantly need reminding, but COVID-19 serves as a blatant reminder of the importance of international scientific cooperation—this should include cooperation between political rivals. In the case of Cuba and the United States, this might again be possible with the new US President, Joe Biden.

Globalization, climate change and social determinants will continue to fledge new pathogens, some of them highly contagious and dangerous. The One Health approach advocated by WHO, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and others is an effort to study and recognize the many global connections between and among people, animals and the environment and implement relevant inter-disciplinary policies. COVID-19, which originated in animals, is a clear example and provides another lesson in collaboration.

In 2015, we saluted apolitical efforts by the Cuban and US bioethics communities to contribute to mutual goals and objectives in science and public health (primarily epidemiology), and to the role of bioethics in the process.[1] It was later suggested these efforts improved health in both countries and fostered the creation of knowledge and new tools.[2,3]

A June 2016 memorandum of understanding between the US Department of Health and Human Services and the Cuban Ministry of Public Health supported cooperation in public health and medical research.[4] There was reason for optimism that scientists in countries with fraught relationships could rise above politics and ideology and help improve the health of populations. The Trump administration unfortunately embraced other values.

COVID-19 was first identified in December 2019 and declared a global pandemic by WHO in March 2020. Many countries mounted a response. Most seem to have made a hash of it. Nevertheless, some governments, businesses and scientists collaborated with each other, and international drug and vaccine trials commenced. We now have promising treatments and vaccines.


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the pandemic. Indeed, there have been a number of examples of international cooperation, but we have also endured competition, ‘vaccine nationalism’ and continued growth in cases and deaths.

Were we overly optimistic five years ago? Were we naïve in thinking that because Cuba and the United States are neighbors with a long and complex historical relationship they would allow enlightened self-interest to drive collaboration? Perhaps. But a bolder and more optimistic assessment is this: If Cuba and the United

States could take steps, however small, to link their scientific communities, then surely other countries could as well.

We are not yet prepared to surrender to the idea that global scientific collaboration is impossible; that politics will invariably undermine research and development; that selfishness will always prevail over symbiosis. If we are wrong, there is no telling how bad the next pandemic will be. If we are right, however, and rivals can collaborate in the service of shared interests—public health might be the best opportunity, especially for Cuba and the United States—then there is room for optimism. 

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