

Medicine Shortage?

BY AL BURT

Chicago Daily News Service

HAVANA — Cuban officials deny there is a shortage of medicine. They insist that those who talk about scarcities are mistaken.

"Yes, there is a problem," said Dr. Pedro Nogueira of the public health ministry. "But it is not a shortage that causes it.

"The public is used to asking for specific medicines by labels. There are no more brand labels now. All is sold in the same bottle and under the same name.

"We got penicillin from

Russia and Japan, but it is not called penicillin.

"Medicines were scarce two years ago, but not now. We get them from Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Canada and other places. We also get the raw materials to make them ourselves."

WHATEVER IT is, there is widespread suspicion among Cubans about the medicines that come in the plain bottles with different names. All of them are referred to as Soviet medicines, and rumors flourish about their effects.

There is an annual mass public campaign to give children

polio vaccine. One Cuban explained that he would never let his child be given the vaccine, even if it meant he would have to go to jail.

"I hear it will make him a Communist. I hear the stories. The vigilante committee says I must give him the medicine or I will be arrested. I will not do it."

The man was genuinely fearful.

Dr. Nogueira smiled at this. "Communism is not given orally," he said. "It comes through the ears and eye."

OTHER SUSPICIONS have more substance.

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☆☆ 23

Cuban Officials Deny It

One Cuban trained to work in public health and with medicines explained that part of the suspicion of Soviet medicinal products is based on the fact that many of them have impurities visible to the eye.

"Sometimes you can hold a bottle up to the light and see the junk. It makes you wonder what you would see if you put it under a microscope."

He contended there is a shortage of certain types of medicines and medical equipment. He specifically mentioned only X-ray machines.

ALTHOUGH MANY physicians now work for the state and also practice privately,

this in time will be eliminated. Because of the large number of doctors (some 2,000) who fled from Cuba after the revolution, those who remained became privileged.

Since 1964, all new doctors sign a "voluntary" oath that they will not practice privately. If they do not sign, they will not be able to obtain medicine and supplies, and will not be able to practice at any hospital. So they sign "voluntarily."

Dr. Nogueira cited statistics intended to show Cuba's health progress under the revolution. He said the government budget for public health now is \$131,-

000,000 annually (about 6 per cent of the total budget), which he described as five times greater than in 1958.

He contended the number of hospitals had increased from 41 to 61, rural hospitals from none to 46 (35 in Oriente Province), and that the overall number of hospital beds had doubled.

ONE OF THE most widely expressed complaints in Cuba concerns absence from work for reasons of ill health. If a man goes to the hospital, his hospital bill is paid but his salary is reduced to from 40 to 60 per cent of normal.

Many workers point out that before the revolution, most private employers provided medical care but also kept them on full salary.

Also, any absence now without a doctor's explanation results in loss of full pay.

Dr. Nogueira said Cuba's greatest health problems were diarrhea and gastroenteritis. He contended the mortality rate from these had diminished, but admitted they were of great concern.

"The prime cause is bad water," he said.

He named unclean milk as the other main source of infection.