Healthcare in Cuba: Cultures and History of Medicine

For over half a century, the small island of Cuba has gained a global reputation for its pioneering health system. Universal access to quality healthcare has become a signature achievement of the Cuban Revolution. In the early 1960s, the new revolutionary government nationalized medical services and began expanding access to healthcare in the countryside. Emphasizing health screening and preventative care, while providing free medical care to all Cuban citizens, these reforms were both popular and successful, and led to significant improvements in overall Cuban health indices. Today the island boasts a lower infant mortality rate than the U.S., and has among the highest life expectancy rates and doctor to patient ratios in the world. What factors account for the seemingly outsized importance of medicine and public health under the Cuban Revolution? What can the study of public health and medicine tell us about broader themes in Cuban history? This intensive four-week summer seminar is designed to introduce students to the history and contemporary development of Cuban medicine and public health. Through a combination of shared readings, discussion, and group visits to local health clinics, we will explore a variety of themes central to the history and development of Cuban medicine. Topics will include: religious, popular, and biomedical approaches to health and healing; the development of healthcare institutions; Cuba’s controversial yet successful fight against HIV/AIDS; gender, maternal health and abortion access in Cuba; race, immigration, and disease; and the development of Cuban medicine in the context of post-1990s economic reforms.

Week 1: Introduction to Healthcare in Cuba; Colonial Antecedents
   Monday: Introduction to Healthcare in Cuba
   Tuesday: Concepts and Debates in the Study of Health and Medicine
   Wednesday: Site visit to a Community Polyclinic
   Thursday: Colonial Medicine in Cuba—Slavery, Science, and Disease

Week 2: Mental Healing between Science and Religion
   Monday: Introduction to the History of Psychiatry
   Tuesday: Slavery, Charity, and the Politics of Psychiatry in Cuba
   Wednesday: Alternatives to Psychiatry, from Popular Healers to Revolutionary Process
   Thursday: Site Visit to San Juan de Dios Clinic OR Museo de Medicina Legal

Week 3: Empire, Immigration and Gender
   Monday: U.S. Imperialism and Public Health
   Tuesday: Independence, Immigration, and the State
   Wednesday: Gender and Medicine in Cuba
   Thursday: Site Visit to an Hogar Materno

Week 4: Revolution and Health
   Monday: The Medical Revolution: Primary Health Care and Citizenship
   Wednesday: Site Visit to Hospital
   Thursday: Economic Crisis and Health: The “Special Period” and Cuban Medicine