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Doctors Flee Desperate Venezuela to Work in Safer Places

Country's loss of medical and other professional personnel is gain for places like remote Chilean island

By Ryan Dube

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ANCUD, Chile—On a recent day in this remote island town, Dr. Jhomar Yansen rushed to operate on a man who had been kicked in the gut by a sheep and was suffering severe internal bleeding.

The surgeon worked in his native Venezuela saving patients with gunshot and knife wounds until last year, when he fled the chaotic, impoverished country like thousands of other professionals. Now he finds himself as part of a cluster of Venezuelan physicians looking after fishermen and shepherds here on a green archipelago in the frigid Southern Pacific.

"This isn't exactly where I thought I'd work," said Dr. Yansen, who lives here with his wife, also a doctor, and their infant daughter. "But thank God I'm here. I didn't want my daughter to grow up in such a hostile environment."

Nearly 2 million Venezuelans have fled their country since the late strongman Hugo Chávez took office in 1999 and put his country on the path to socialist revolution, according to Tomás Páez, a sociologist at Venezuela's Central University who wrote a book on the diaspora.

The numbers have accelerated since President Nicolás Maduro took over in 2013, Mr. Páez said, with businessmen, university professors, farmers and oil workers abandoning a country riven by authoritarian rule and protests. Venezuelans are flooding particularly into neighboring Colombia and Brazil. They have boarded boats bound for Caribbean islands. In the U.S., their asylum requests have surged, while the sight of them selling cornmeal cakes known as arepas has become a commonplace in the Peruvian capital, Lima.

The exodus of doctors is exacerbating the already serious strain on Venezuela's once-vaunted public-health system, which has been crippled by dilapidated hospitals and shortages of medicine, supplies and equipment. Figures released last month by the country's health ministry showed maternal mortality there increased by 66% last year; infant mortality, which rose by 30% last year, is now higher in Venezuela than in war-torn Syria. Malaria and diphtheria rates are soaring amid shortages of insect repellents, vaccinations, and public-health funding.

The Venezuelan Federation of Doctors estimates that some 16,000 doctors have left in 12 years, moving as far away as Spain and Australia.

"If this wave of migration of doctors to other countries continues, a moment is going to arrive...when they aren't going to have enough capacity to run hospitals," said Juan Correa, the federation's vice president. Calls to Venezuelan health authorities seeking comment weren't returned.

Venezuela's loss is helping places like Ancud on Chiloé, a tranquil island of green rolling hills, Humboldt penguins and wooden churches located 760 miles south of Santiago—and a world away from Venezuela's strife.

"We've had, I would say, a blessing with doctors of such good technical quality," said Luis Hernán Vallejos, a Chilean physician who runs the Ancud hospital's emergency unit.

Venezuelans have arrived to Chile in droves, attracted to the political stability in Latin America's most developed nation. Last year, nearly 23,000 Venezuelans received visas, up from 439 in 2006, with recent arrivals including many

young, well-educated professionals, according to the head of Chile's immigration office, Rodrigo Sandoval.

"Chile is kind of this California of the south," said Cristián Doña, an immigration expert at the Diego Portales University in Santiago, referring to this country's appeal to South American migrants.

Last year, 1,313 Venezuela-educated physicians, more than any other foreign group, took a test to work in Chile's public-health system, up from just 16 in 2011, according to exam administrators. Most took jobs in areas that have an acute shortage of physicians, said Juan Carlos Riera, a urologist who created an association of Venezuelan doctors in Chile.

Many more could arrive. In 2016, 88% of medical students in their final year at four Venezuelan universities said they hoped to emigrate after graduation, according to research by Iván de la Vega, a Venezuelan sociologist.

Mario Castro, the first Venezuelan physician to settle in Ancud, fled with his family in late 2015 after a friend was kidnapped and a neighbor's car was stolen with her baby in the back seat.

"In no way did I want my son to grow up in an environment with so much violence," the fertility expert said.

In the last 18 months, about a dozen other Venezuelan doctors-including surgeons, gynecologists, and anesthesiologists-have found work in Ancud's small 72-bed hospital.

The physicians recently saved a baby through an emergency caesarean section and operated on a man's deeply cut forearm and wrist to avoid amputation. Angélica Velásquez, a 25-year-old woman Dr. Castro treated for difficulties conceiving a child, recently gave birth to twins.

"I've had an excellent experience," she said. "His knowledge can help a lot of women like me."

These Venezuelan exiles from a Caribbean climate have adjusted to the Chilean island's cold nights by learning to split firewood to heat their houses. They have been rattled by powerful earthquakes and had to start thinking of where to flee in the case of a tsunami.

Sometimes, they listen to Venezuela's folk music, recalling memories of home.

"At times you want to cry," said Karina Castilla, a gynecologist from Caracas. "You're in a country that has welcomed you, but it isn't your country and it will never be."

Still, they don't see a future back in Venezuela. Here there are no food shortages. Some doctors have opened businesses, and many are able to send remittances and medicines to family back home.

"I have no problem living here," emergency-room physician Daniel Arocha said as he watched his daughter play in a park. "We found what we were looking for."

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. How many doctors have left Venezuela in 12 years, according to the Venezuelan Federation of Doctors?

- A. about 8,000
- B. about 16,000
- C. about 23,000
- D. about 2 million

2. What effect is the migration of doctors from Venezuela to other countries having on Venezuela?

- A. It is putting more strain on Venezuela's public-health system, which is already facing major shortage problems.
- B. It is helping Venezuela's public-health system by stopping the overcrowding of hospitals and clinics.
- C. It is enabling Venezuelans who stay in Venezuela to undergo the training they need to become doctors.
- D. It is causing Venezuelans to reach out to doctors in other countries when they need medical help.

3. Doctors are leaving Venezuela because it is currently a dangerous place to live. What evidence from the text supports this conclusion?

- A. After leaving Venezuela, Dr. Yansen said "Thank God I'm here [in Chile]. I didn't want my daughter to grow up in such a hostile environment."
- B. Juan Correa said that "if this wave of migration of doctors to other countries continues, a moment is going to arrive... when they aren't going to have enough capacity to run hospitals."
- C. Many Venezuelan doctors are settling in Chile and taking jobs in areas of Chile's public-health system that have a serious shortage of physicians.
- D. Angélica Velásquez had a positive experience with her doctor from Venezuela, and said that "his knowledge can help a lot of women like me."

4. The migration of Venezuelan doctors to places like Chile is having a positive effect on those countries. What evidence from the text supports this statement?

- A. Some doctors from Venezuela are able to open businesses in Chile, and to send support and medicine back home to Venezuela.
- B. Venezuelans have arrived to Chile in droves, attracted to the political stability there.
- C. Venezuelan physicians have had to adjust to Chile's climate and natural events like earthquakes.
- D. Most Venezuela-educated doctors who came to Chile last year took jobs in areas that have an acute shortage of physicians.

5. What is the main idea of this text?

- A. Nearly 2 million Venezuelans have fled their country since Hugo Chávez took office in 1999 and put his country on the path to socialist revolution.
- B. In the last 18 months, about a dozen Venezuelan doctors have found work in the small 72-bed hospital in Ancud, Chile.
- C. Doctors are fleeing the violence and political instability of Venezuela, leading to more problems in Venezuela but helping the countries they migrate to.
- D. Venezuela's doctors are leaving the country to find better jobs and increased pay in other nations, such as Chile, Colombia, and Brazil.