**Studying Medicine in Russia:**

I attended St. Stanislaus College from 1969-1975, where I obtained my G.C.E O’Level Certificate in 10 subjects, and A ’Level Certificates in Physics, Chemistry, and Biology. I am very grateful for the opportunity to have attended this prestigious Catholic School, and to have obtained the quality of education that was one of the best in the Caribbean.

I always wanted to study medicine, and after the opportunity to do so at UWI, or the UK did not materialize, I opted to go to the USSR. My G.C.E O’ and A ’Level Certificates qualified me for a joint Guyana- Russian scholarship to pursue my studies in Russia. At that time Russia was one of the fifteen Republics that made up the USSR. My Dad had done some research on higher education in the USSR, and sought the views of some local Physicians and former scholarship students before making the final decision. For me at the age of twenty-one, it was a step into the unknown. It meant learning a different language, adjusting to a completely different culture, and studying medicine and sitting exams in Russian.

I personally had read about Communism, Marxism-Leninism, and the propaganda about the society being well organized, and the people being well disciplined, and trustworthy. When I got there, I had a rude awakening after I accidentally left my wallet with £120, under the pillow in my hotel room in Moscow. When myself, and another Guyanese arrived in Rostov-on-Don, where we were enrolled in a Preparatory Faculty of the Medical school, I reported the matter to my professor. She promised to investigate, and gave me all assurances that my wallet would be returned. I was naïve to believe so . After many promises and the direct intervention of the Dean of the Faculty, who was on a trip to Moscow, I was told that all efforts were unsuccessful.

My first year was spent learning the language, and basically re-doing Physics, Chemistry and Biology at O’ and A ’Level standard in Russian. This was a crash course at which I excelled due mainly to the good education at Saints. I recall always being summoned to the blackboard by the Physics teacher at each class to solve problems .This was a breeze because Father Rodriguez taught us well, and used to solve each Physics problem, step by step, on the blackboard at St. Stanislaus. I had to get accustomed to going to school 6 days a week with little time for chores, homework, recreation and getting ready for Monday morning again. We were not allowed to miss classes without an official Physician’s note if ill, and any class missed had to be re-taken . Examinations were all oral. On exam day, a few of us in the group would be beckoned to a room, individually, where you are allowed 10-15 minutes to choose a question paper, and prepare notes before sitting in front of a panel of 3-4 professors and discussing your answers in Russian. This was very subjective and a lot depended on your performances in previous tests.

Each student is issued a book –the Zachut Book, that records your score of 2-5, where 2 is fail, 3-satisfactory, 4-good, and 5-excellent.All tests have to be completed and passed before you are allowed to sit for the final exam. The entire exam process was tough, especially since it all depended on your command of the Russian language.

My scholarship was a good one..The Guyana Government provided return airfares every summer back home, and allowances for warm clothing, books, and in-transit expenses through London. This was very helpful, since we bought English medical books, which enforced our understanding of the topics taught in Russian. For their part, the Russian government provided free accommodation, a monthly stipend, Russian text books, and winter clothing which was much warmer but less fashionable than the ones we bought in London. Each winter and summer, for those not returning home, the Russian government provided excursions via rail, to other cities including Leningrad, Kiev, and Sochi on the Black Sea. I was able to visit Latvia, and Kiev during two of these winter excursions.

After my preparatory year, I entered medical school in the same city Rostov-on-Don. It was supposed to be one of the oldest medical schools in Europe, and I must say that the quality of teaching was of a high standard. Like anywhere else in the world, success in any institution of higher learning depends on the individual. It was tough, and very difficult adjusting to Russian speaking lecturers, but eventually living in an environment where your very existence depends on knowing the language, it became easier. I do recall the anatomy classes where in the heart of winter we would trek to the Faculty nearby, and endure the scent of formalin as the professor displays specimens of parts of the human body, and illustrating the different vessels, nerves, and muscles. For the final exam the anatomy professor would stick a long pair of forceps into an anatomical space, or hold a dissected nerve and ask you to name it. That was nerve –racking..

It was helpful that although medicine was taught in Russian, most of the important words had Greek roots. Therefore Pharmacology would be Pharmacologia, and Physiology would be Physiologia in Russian. At the end of the third year, I asked for a transfer to Minsk, Belarus, where there were more Guyanese medical students. It was a more modern city, completely rebuilt after World War II. The facilities at the hostel were much better, and this made life easier. I completed medical school there, and graduated in June 1984. In a moment of reflection I recall during my course in Tuberculosis, I had to wake up early morning in the heart of winter, wait at the bus stop, and change buses in order to get to classes on time..

I am very grateful for the scholarship I secured to study medicine in Russia. It was not easy and many other foreign students could not complete because of the length of the school week and other harsh conditions. As a foreign student we were given certain privileges which made life easier, like being able to shop at the in-Tourist shops where only foreign currency was accepted. The USSR was a closed society and you definitely felt as though you were behind the Iron curtain. All TV programs were skewed to depict the ideology of the Communist Party. Foreign news was not accessible. However, with a good short wave radio, we were able to access BBC and VOA.

It is with nostalgia that I reflect on those days in Russia. Having graduated I worked in different regions of Guyana for nine years, before doing a one-year Post graduate Diploma in Obstetrics and Gynecology at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. Thereafter, I worked for eleven years in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the Princesss Margaret Hospital in the Bahamas .In 2004 I migrated to the USA, and completed a Residency at the University of North Dakota.

I now practice at the Urgent Care Center of the Medical Center Hospital in Odessa, TX.

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