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The Future of Healthcare and Medical Education in the DPRK

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The current healthcare condition in the DRPK has been in a severe decline since the 1990s due to natural disasters, economic problems, food, and energy shortages. By the early 2000s, many of the North Korean hospitals and clinics lacked essential medicines, equipment, running water and electricity. The current life expectancy for females and the males are significantly lower for North Koreans than it is for South Koreans. Malnutrition in North Korea is rampant, with 20% of North Korean children have stunted growth.

There are several areas in which North Korea cannot solve their problems, requiring outside intervention, and one of these areas is in the field of medical education. The main reason for this is the lack of resource and their isolation from the international community. Many of the North Korean doctors severely lack basic knowledge, skills, and equipment to appropriately take care of the North Korean population.

The current medical education system is based on the policy of the former Soviet Union. The undergraduate medical school is a 4.5-year program. Students are taught basic science with very little clinical exposure. Once they graduate from medical school, students are placed into various hospitals for training and apprenticed to become full-time staff at the hospital. One of the major flaws with this type of system is the significant variability in the training which students receive. Currently, there are no standardized clinical training programs in DPRK. PUST College of Medicine is the first institution to initiate Western-based clinical training for medical students, with an Internship training program, Residency training program and a Fellowship Training program.

Historically, medical education has played an important role in the development of a society. Education has always proven to be by far the most effective and efficient way to impact a nation. Education teaches one how to "fish." Within the context of education, medical education has an even more profound impact on society. Improved medical knowledge saves lives. Improving the current medical education system in the DPRK will directly impact the quality of healthcare delivery and will, in turn, enhance the healthcare of the people of DPRK. Improving medical education system will also have a positive impact on the economy and to improve the quality of life.

In 2016, The Education Committee of the DPRK Party formally approved the establishment of a College of Medicine as a part of the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology. Currently, we have 45 undergraduate medical students enrolled in our medical school. Also, 15 post-graduate students who have graduated from other medical schools have been selected to receive clinical training in our program.

The main goal of our clinical training program is to develop an effective Western standard medical education model for DPRK to emulate. We want to build future leaders in medicine and the healthcare industry. We want to train our student physicians the Western values of compassion and empathy, which will have a positive influence in approach to healthcare in DPRK. To strategically accomplish our goal, we will proceed with the following 4 phases of strategic planning.

- The first phase will be to establish a functioning undergraduate medical school. Currently, we

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have 45 students enrolled in our medical school.

- The second phase is to develop a post-graduate medical training program in Pyongyang including an internship, residency and fellowship training program following international standards. Currently, we have 15 postgraduate students enrolled in our postdoctoral training program. We have selected two fellow candidates in Nephrology for 2020 and two fellow candidates in Surgery for 2020.
- The third phase is to establish a self-sustaining teaching hospital in Pyongyang. The teaching hospital will have centers of excellence with modern outpatient and specialty centers in the areas of CV disease, Orthopedic, and Spine Surgery, Neurosurgery, Gastroenterology, a Cancer Center, Urological and Renal Centers.
- Lastly, the fourth phase will be to partner with the business community to develop needed medical services such as pharmaceutical companies, medical device companies, and medical supply companies to name a few.

One of the unique aspects of our program is that our students are taught in English as the primary language and that all of our faculties are recruited from Europe, Canada, Australia, and the United States.

In summary, we believe that our medical school and clinical training programs are needed in the DPRK. The PUST College of Medicine and the new clinical training programs will hugely improve the current medical education system in DPRK. We believe graduate students from our programs will have a very positive impact on healthcare delivery in the DPRK.