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Americans could soon be thanking Fidel Castro for their revolutionary cancer drugs

By **Michael E. Miller** May 12 at 6:27 AM

Cuban healthcare is a keen topic of debate here in the United States.

If your allegiances lie on the left of the political spectrum, you're likely to see the communist government's clinics as godsend — well, Che Guevara-sends — responsible [for a life expectancy](#) on the poor island on par with that of its rich northern neighbor.

If you're conservative, you're likely to recite horror stories of medical shortages or doctor defections under the Castros. For every Michael Moore talking up Cuban healthcare, there is a Marco Rubio ready to tear it right down.

Whatever your stance on Cuba's system, however, you could soon benefit from its medical advances, particularly when it comes to cancer. In fact, Americans suffering from the emperor of all maladies might soon be thanking Fidel for his country's miraculous medications.

Recent improvements in relations between the two arch-rivals are leading to agreements that will soon bring Cuban cancer drugs to the U.S. When New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo visited Havana last month, it was partly to shore up an accord between New York's Roswell Park Cancer Institute and Cuba's Center for Molecular Immunology that will bring Cuban lung cancer vaccine Cimavax to the U.S. for clinical trials, [Reuters reported](#).

While not a cure for cancer by any means, Cimavax is a powerful and incredibly cheap cancer drug in Cuba. "Medical researchers at the Center for Molecular Immunology worked on Cimavax for 25 years before the Ministry of Health made it available to the public — for free — in 2011," [Wired reported](#). "Each shot costs the government about \$1. A Phase II trial from 2008 showed lung cancer patients who received the vaccine lived an average of four to six months longer than those who didn't."

Cimavax is no fluke. Instead, it's a product of a Cuban government that — whatever you think of its politics or

human-rights record — has been [praised for its pioneering medical and biotech research](#). “After the 1981 dengue fever outbreak struck nearly 350,000 Cubans, the government established the Biological Front, an effort to focus research efforts by various agencies toward specific goals,” [Wired wrote](#). “Its first major accomplishment was the successful (and unexpected) production of interferon, a protein that plays a role in human immune response. Since then, Cuban immunologists made several other vaccination breakthroughs, including their own vaccines for meningitis B and hepatitis B, and monoclonal antibodies for kidney transplants.” All this is even more impressive considering the crippling embargo that America has imposed on the island for half a century.

Other countries [such as Canada](#) and Japan have already started testing Cimavax for their own use. But politics blocked the medicine from migrating to the U.S. — until now.

President Obama’s December decision to begin restoring diplomatic ties to Cuba has already increased scientific exchange between the two countries.

“This agreement establishes a collaboration between our two institutions to develop a cancer vaccine in lung cancer,” Candace Johnson, CEO of Roswell Park, said at a news conference before Cuomo’s trip. “We’re very excited to take this to the United States to treat patients.”

Johnson hopes to get the go-ahead to test Cimavax in the U.S. within six to eight months, and to start clinical trials within a year, [Wired reported](#).

Cimavax could be just the first among many revolutionary Cuban drugs to end up in the capitalist bloodstreams of gringos here in the U.S. [Another powerful — and controversial — Cuban cancer-fighting medicine](#) is made from the venom of [a frightening blue scorpion](#). The venom has been credited for thousands of seemingly miraculous recovery stories but has yet to be clinically studied. Cimavax’s upcoming U.S. trial could change that.

Coincidentally, Wired’s article was published on the same day that former Cuban leader Fidel Castro made his highest profile appearance in years. Castro, who has [long battled a stomach ailment rumored to have been cancer](#), met with French President François Hollande on Monday in Havana.

“I had before me a man who made history,” Hollande [told reporters](#). “There is a debate on what could be his place, his responsibilities. But coming to Cuba, I wanted to meet Fidel Castro.”

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