

Blood, flies, agony: inside Venezuela's hospital hell

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Plumber Freddy Herrera broke his leg in four places when he crashed his motorbike nine months ago. But his real troubles started when he got to hospital.

The doctors fixed the leg. Then they had to operate 13 times more to cut out infections caught in the stinking hospital where he languishes.

With open rubbish bins, flies in the corridors and rotting corpses stacked in the morgue, this [public hospital](#) in the Coche district of Caracas could be the set of a horror film.

But it is all too real: the dirty, miserable human face of Venezuela's economic and political crisis.

There aren't many doctors here—just 18 for a community of 150,000 people. Medics warn harmful bacteria has grown to resist the few antibiotics that are available.

"I'm scared that after fighting this for so long, they will come and tell me they have to take off my leg because the bacteria have infected the bone," Herrera says.

"I don't want to go up to the operating theater anymore. Every time I do, I come back feeling worse."

Dying in agony

Coche's is one of hundreds of Venezuelan hospitals that are overcrowded and desperately undersupplied.

Traumatologist Efraim Vegas, 29, says he recently watched helplessly as a young man died writhing in agony from a gunshot wound to the knee.

"I had no serum, no spare blood, no morphine," he says.

"We have had various people who have ended up having amputations because there isn't enough antiseptic in the operating theaters."

The hospital's emergency room only has five saline drips for use during the night. During that shift, up to 20 patients arrive.

"I feel like my hands are tied," Vegas says. "I cannot heal people. I just give them relief and help them as they die."

Rotting flesh

Venezuela's economy has crashed in line with the price of crude oil—the export on which the state relies.

As its revenues have plunged, imports of [medical supplies](#) have dried up.

In the Coche hospital, the oxygen tubes are washed and re-used. So are the supposedly disposable electric scalpels.

One of its three operating theaters is closed due to contamination.

Drops of fresh blood spot the floor at the entrance to the hospital's

morgue.

It is made to house four corpses, but recently it has held up to 12 at a time.

"Sometimes the bodies are in there for up to three days. It is terrible," says Vegas.

"It all smells of rotting flesh. This is like a hospital in wartime."

The hospital has no specialists in infectious diseases.

Instead, the doctors identify infections by the smell of the wounds, says one of them, who asked not to be named.

He says he helped save a man who had been shot in the head and left in the street. The wound was infested with worms when he arrived.

Flies breeding

More than 80 percent of Venezuela's hospital departments are lacking surgical supplies, according to the Venezuelan Health Observatory. More than 74 percent of the departments are short of medicine.

The observatory calculates that 100,000 hospital beds are needed, but only about 15,000 are functioning.

The political opposition blames socialist President Nicolas Maduro's economic management for the chaos. They accuse the government of corruption and incompetence.

Maduro insists the shortages are temporary. He has vowed to restart national production of medical supplies to replace the lost imports.

The socialist government says it has invested \$250 billion in healthcare over the past 13 years, particularly in poor areas.

Some of the equipment bought with that money did get to Coche. But doctors here say much of it is useless now because of a lack of spare parts.

Only one of the [hospital](#)'s four elevators is working.

The pit below the shaft is filled with stagnant water where flies breed, says the lift operator Rosa Herrera, 61.

"In here we take up food, patients, the dead, people who have been shot," she says. "Plus the rubbish and the human waste."

\$60 salary

Vegas earns the equivalent of about \$60 a month. He can only afford to eat twice a day and says he has lost 26 kilograms (57 pounds) in weight during the crisis.

For their trouble, he and his colleagues face robberies and threats from patients and their families.

"Being a doctor in Venezuela is an act of heroism," says the doctor who asked not to be named.

The country's Medical Federation says 13,000 doctors have left the country since Maduro's predecessor Hugo Chavez, the father of Venezuela's "socialist revolution," came to power in 1999.

Now Vegas says he himself may follow.

Freddy Herrera cannot go anywhere for now. He lies, swatting at the flies, hoping he will one day walk away.

His wife used to come and see him, but her visits are fewer now. She has started treatment for cancer.

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