

New Free Eye Care Centre Opened in Kingston

Caribbean nationals in need of free eye care can now benefit from the services offered by the Jamaica/Cuba Ophthalmology Centre, at the St. Joseph's Hospital, east Kingston, which was officially opened Wednesday (January 27).

The Centre was established under the Jamaica/Cuba Eye Care Programme. A 15-member Cuban health team is currently in Jamaica, and will be work with a Jamaican health team to provide the services. The programme is expected to run for three years, after which it is projected that enough Jamaican medical personnel will be trained to operate the Centre. Minister of Health, Hon. Rudyard Spencer, said that the programme is a complement to the Government's no user fees policy and that with the facility, the choices available to those in need of ophthalmic care, but are unable to afford treatment, have been widened. "The facility also advances the mandate of the Council for Human and Social Development (COHSOD), which seeks to promote the improvement of health, including the development and organisation of efficient and affordable health services in the Caribbean Community," he said. The programme has four components: selection of persons for surgery; surgical services and laser treatment; follow up post operative care; and strengthening the capacity of Jamaican doctors and nurses. Conditions to be treated are Cataract (opacity of the lens), Pterigium (fleshy growth over the eye) and Diabetic Retinopathy (damage to the back of the eye or excessive blood vessel growth from uncontrolled diabetes) in the first instance. The introduction of other treatments will be considered, depending on the requests from the Ministry of Health. Persons treated at the Centre will be able to obtain post operative care at the National Chest Hospital, which has a new 22-bed ward. Residences, that will accommodate the Cuban Health Professionals who will be working at the Centre, are also located at the hospital. Jamaicans will be selected for the programme through referrals from Government health facilities, or through community screenings conducted under the programme. Patients from other CARICOM countries will access the programme through referrals directed through the Ministry's head office. Persons who are already on the list for the screening process will be contacted, as soon as they are scheduled for surgery. Previously, after persons were screened, those selected for surgery were sent to Cuba, where the procedures were done according to medical assessment. Approximately 1,000 persons could be accommodated per year for treatment in Cuba. Under the new programme, patients will no longer travel to Cuba, and the Centre has the capacity to treat 5,000 patients per year. In addition to the provision of specialist eye care staff, the Cuban Government has equipped the Centre, while Jamaica will provide the Cubans with accommodation, travel and meals. Cuba's Ambassador to Jamaica, His Excellency Yuri Gala López, pointed out that that the friendly bond between Jamaica and Cuba has been strengthened, as evidenced by the nearly 300 Jamaican youths studying free of charge in Cuban universities, as well as more than 130 Cuban co-operators who are giving their support in different bilateral programmes, especially in the areas of education and health in Jamaica. He said that the opening of the new ophthalmology centre is a clear indication that these relations will continue to bring the two countries closer, during 2010. Since its inception in September, 2005, approximately 44,000 persons have been screened, while 5,354 surgeries have been performed under the Jamaica/Cuba Eye Care Programme.