

Medicines Expired and Hidden in Official Silence

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At least 400,000 kilos of medicines expired between 2010 and 2014 without fulfilling their goal: curing or alleviating the conditions of people with diseases. The drugs were never distributed to the hospitals throughout the country.

The medicines expired while they were stored in the ports of La Guaira, Puerto Cabello or in containers at *Servicio de Elaboraciones Farmacéuticas*, (Sefar), located in Las Adjuntas, Caracas.

Only in 2014 workers at Sefar, an office attached to the Ministry of Health, counted 18 containers with 50,000 kilos of damaged material. The crates contained shipments of drugs such as Bicalutamide 150 mg, used as a treatment for metastatic prostate cancer and which is now scarce in the country. Also, Enalapril 10 milligrams, a type of antihypertensive that is also a scarce product, and boxes of omeprazole and fluconazole, which expired two years earlier, among other medicines.

Members of the *Movida Parlamentaria* group, made up of Deputies José Gregorio Contreras, Luis Barragán, Juan Pablo García, Ángel Medina, Carlos Berrizbeitia and former Deputy María Corina Machado, revealed that all the drugs had been incinerated. For that operation, the Ministry of Health had availed itself in 2012 of the services of the companies incineration companies Calderas Serv-Jet in Maracay and Incineradora Hornos de La Guaira.

Although there are no precise data on the total amount spent on the import of expired medicines in the past four years, their storage and subsequent incineration, the parliamentary report notes that in 2011, the government paid \$31 million to Cuba for these medicines. In 2012, payments totaled \$46.5 million. Medications found between 2013 and 2014 cost \$400 million.

Apart from the expired medicines, there was a cargo of 2,588 kilos of raw material to produce antibiotics, carbapenems, lyophilized drugs and preservatives used in hospitals, which expired at Sefar due to delays in the construction of the processing plant. The warning was made by the Health Ministry itself in its 2013 Annual Report. This material cost a total of \$7.5 million, which were disbursed from the Ministry's 2012 budget.

No Culprits, No Answers

The Comptroller General's Office produced two reports indicating that the Health Ministry should correct the storage problems that caused the drugs to expire in 2011 and 2013. The first document noted the finding of medicines with expiration dates between 1 and 6 years. The second report stated that there were medicines that expired 2 or 3 years before the finding, which were purchased with an expiration period that was very close to the date of import, and for which Cuba received payment in advance. The reports did not establish direct culprits.

“[The Ministry of Health] acquired the same types of medicines in larger amounts, with overprice ranging between 21.21% and 9,670.11%, without any justification,” says report prepared in 2013 under Comptroller General Adelina González .

In the 4 years since 2010, four people have occupied the post of Minister of Health: Eugenia Sader Castellanos, Isabel Iturria, Francisco Armada and Nancy Pérez Sierra, currently in office. Only Sader Castellanos was indicted by the Attorney General for fraudulent embezzlement, conspiracy and budget overdraft. There have been no new announcements about the case after the action on June 20, 2014.

In August 2014, the Supreme Court rejected the appeal of abstention filed by NGOs Espacio Público, Acción Solidaria, Transparencia Venezuela and Provea, demanding the Ministry of Health answers for the loss of medicines imported from Cuba. The NGOs also requested the Ministry to inform about the results of investigations announced by officials after finding the expired drugs. They did not get any answers.

According to Ministry of Health Regulations, the General Directorate of Production of Supplies is responsible for domestic production of medicines and supplies, and therefore, they should answer for the delays and losses caused by the damage of raw material for the production of medicines.

The same document states that the General Directorate of Supplies must monitor and evaluate the population's access to essential medicines and other supplies. Sefar, created in July 1993 and reopened in 2006, has the responsibility to develop 10 types of essential medicines, as well as to

distribute imported materials and drugs under international conventions and those stored in their warehouses.

Sefar has changed directors 4 times since 2010. But none of them has ordered investigations on the expired medicines reported between 2010 and 2014. In 2010, the director was Fernando José Urbano Rodríguez, and later, in 2011, Nicolás Gustavo Seijas Arrieta, who was dismissed later that year and went on to become director of the Conviasa airline. After that, Julio Cesar Aguilar Rondón took office, through the year 2012. Between 2013 and mid-2014 Lesbia Josefina Muro Lozada was appointed director. She banned access of opposition deputies to inspect the Sefar warehouses.

Four people—in as many years—have been at the helm of the General Directorate of Supplies, and no investigations have been commissioned into the irregularities in the distribution of medicines. Leopoldo Landaeta Vargas took this office in 2010, Janina María Colmenares Sarmiento in 2011, Yelitza Jardín in 2012, and from 2013 to the present, Marianela Del Mar Padrino.