A delegation of oncology nurses from the United States traveled to Havana, Cuba, in December 2011 for an academic and cultural exchange. The trip, sponsored by Academic Travel Abroad, Amistur, and the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP), provided the opportunity for 17 members of the Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) to learn more about the Cuban healthcare system, nursing, and cancer care.

After arriving in Cuba’s capital city, Havana, the delegation was greeted by a bilingual tour guide from Amistur, Tatiana Rodriguez. In addition to serving as a tour guide, Rodriguez would become the congenial and articulate authority about Cuban history and daily life. The delegation stayed at the seaside Hotel Melia Cohiba, which provided a stark contrast to the rundown buildings passed on the trip through Havana.

Cuban Healthcare System

The Cuban healthcare system is internationally known for primary and preventive health care as well as global humanitarian aid. The system was developed to treat low-income patients with scarce resources and a focus on health promotion in community settings. In fact, Cuba spends only $229.80 per capita per year, whereas the United States spends $6,096 per capita per year (Nationmaster.com, 2012). The Cuban system is well recognized in the United States. American nurse Clara Barton even worked as a nurse in Cuban hospitals during the Spanish-American War. In fact, Cuban nursing schools were developed based on the U.S. standards of nursing at the turn of the 20th century. To implement the Nightingale model in Cuba, nursing was transitioned from being overseen by religious orders to a secular and standardized model of education. In 1899, the first