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Medicare crooks like Cuba -- why?

BY MYRIAM MARQUEZ

What would make Darvis Lázaro Leal think he could get back to Miami after skipping out to Cuba while under investigation for healthcare fraud?

Leal, 30, returned last week from Cuba via Costa Rica. He was immediately arrested at Miami International Airport on a warrant issued last year on an indictment under seal on charges of operating a pharmacy in 2006 that filed \$425,000 in false Medicare claims for medical supplies that were never prescribed by doctors or used by patients.

What would make Jorge Ramirez, a former owner of a Miami clinic that treated blood disorders and was charged with defrauding Medicare of -- gulp -- \$42.2 million, think he could get back here after taking off for Cuba?

\$420 MILLION FRAUD

Ramirez, 41, was allegedly working with others the FBI believes are back in Cuba after defrauding -- big gulp -- \$420 million from Medicare. The phony claims involved 85 medical equipment companies that never provided a wheelchair, a respirator or any other life-saving equipment to a single patient. Ramirez was arrested at the airport on Dec. 12 and his case is pending. His two co-defendants are -- where else? -- in Cuba.

As Miami Herald reporter Jay Weaver's Medicare Racket series exposed last year, at least half of South Florida's Medicare fugitives are believed to be back in Cuba. There are at least 60 Cuban scam artists believed to have collectively bilked more than a billion dollars from taxpayers through medical businesses that helped no one. They took off to Cuba when the government started to put 2 and 2 million together.

That it took so long to figure out that clinics weren't treating patients and equipment companies weren't selling equipment is another example of the federal bureaucratic maze that strangles us with skyrocketing insurance fees and Medicare costs. Without targeting sufficient federal money to investigate medical companies and healthcare providers at the front end, we end up chasing after fat-cat crooks once they've cashed in their government checks.

It's lunacy.

The most notorious are the Benitez brothers -- Carlos, Luis and Jose -- who are accused of filing \$119 million in false claims for HIV infusion therapy, a treatment that's questionable at best and no longer standard practice. They were living the good life in the Dominican Republic -- all on the backs of taxpayers who actually work and pay our taxes.

When the feds went after them in Santo Domingo, they ran off

to -- conga drums, please --

Cuba.

A CLOSED SOCIETY

So what would make these folks -- most of them who arrived in the 1990s -- think they can break the law and then fly back like tourists?

It's a question that nags because Cuba is a closed society. Leaving it, legally at least, isn't easy. Ask any poor rafter who made it out alive. There are thousands in Cuba who have U.S. visas, but the Cuban regime has yet to issue exit papers.

Leal allegedly got \$260,918 in Medicare payments. That's a lot of money to spend in Cuba, where the average salary is \$20 a month. He supposedly was a clothing salesman, selling goods to and from Cuba and Costa Rica. Uh-huh.

Sure, call it just another exile conspiracy theory. But after 50 years of Castro rule, after dozens of American felons and murderers have been welcomed with open arms in Havana, it's not far-fetched that Medicare scammers would

be living the high life in Cuba

with a nod from the Castro

brothers.

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