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## **UM doctor who examined American diplomats in Havana: Symptoms are not caused by stress**

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The University of Miami doctor who traveled to Havana to examine American diplomats and others who were allegedly victims of health attacks has ruled out Cuba's suggestion that the symptoms were the result of mental angst.

"It is not psychosomatic," Dr. Michael Hoffer told el Nuevo Herald in reference to the cause that could have provoked physical symptoms suffered by at least 24 confirmed victims over a period of eight months.

People suffering from psychosomatic disorders develop physical symptoms with emotional causes such as stress and anxiety. Among the most common symptoms reported by the American victims — which include diplomats, family members and intelligence officials — are headaches, loss of hearing, nausea, fatigue and mild brain trauma.

Canadian diplomats reported similar symptoms, but little information has been revealed in their cases.

Hoffer, a former U.S. Navy doctor, was tapped by the U.S. Department of State last year to examine 80 U.S. employees and relatives in Havana. An otolaryngologist who also specializes in the treatment of concussions, he is one of the authors of two medical articles that describe details of the case. The articles are supposed to appear in the Journal of the American Medical Association and The New England Journal of Medicine once they are approved for publication by the State Department.

Exactly what caused the ailments? That remains a mystery.

The State Department has said it has not yet been able to determine the source or the perpetrators of the alleged attacks but have pinpointed the time frame and locations where the incidents occurred: between November 2016 and August 2017 at diplomats' residences and at rooms in two hotels in Havana, the Hotel Nacional and Capri.

According to the AP, the FBI has ruled out that an acoustic weapon is to blame for the attacks.

"We still do not have definitive answers on the source or cause of the attacks. The investigation into the attacks is ongoing," a State Department spokesperson told the Herald in a statement. "The Department's Diplomatic Security Service continues to coordinate closely with appropriate law enforcement agencies."

Hoffer declined to comment on any other details tied to the cases because he said he was not authorized by the State Department to do so.

In January, a retired employee from UM who spoke with Hoffer said the doctor considered there was evidence to qualify the incidents as attacks.

The Cuban government, meanwhile, says there is no evidence that any kind of attack has occurred against U.S. personnel. Cuban doctors summoned by the island's government to investigate the

incidents have suggested that the allegations of so many different symptoms could be a case of collective hysteria, a theory also bounced around by some experts in the United States.

Josefina Vidal, the Cuban diplomat in charge of U.S. affairs at the foreign ministry, publicly stated in January that “months of exhaustive investigations have shown that there has been no attack.”

The U.S. team handling the investigation evaluated several theories, among them that the symptoms were caused by a virus. But U.S. officials recently disclosed that a panel of experts who evaluated the cases concluded last summer that the symptoms “were most likely related to trauma from a non-natural source,” Charles Rosenfarb, medical director at the State Department, said at a Senate hearing in January.

After being notified of the incidents in February 2017, the Cuban government launched its own investigation. Cuban officials have complained that U.S. investigators have not shared enough information. Cuban doctors did not interview any of the American victims.

Dr. Mitchell J. Valdés-Sosa, director of the Neuroscience Center of Cuba, told the Miami Herald that medical information sent to the Cuba team by U.S. authorities did not include audiograms, MRIs, CAT scans or tables indicating what symptoms each patient had.

What the Cuban investigators received was “a collection of nonspecific symptoms,” he said. “We do not know if everyone was affected equally.”

Valdés-Sosa also said that he has heard about the imminent publication of articles written by U.S. doctors but added: “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

The alleged attacks have plunged Washington and Havana into a bitter dispute.

The Cuban Foreign Ministry says there is no evidence that any kind of attack has occurred, but the United States has insisted that Cuba is responsible for the protection of its diplomats. President Donald Trump’s administration has ordered the evacuation of most of its personnel at the embassy in Havana and the expulsion of 17 Cuban diplomats.

With the evacuation order came a warning advising Americans to “reconsider” trips to Cuba. More recently, the State Department was contacted by 19 American travelers, who reported symptoms similar to those suffered by the diplomats. However, the agency did not clarify if any of these cases were medically confirmed.

Cuban officials have complained that they learned of these allegations by reading the Miami Herald and el Nuevo Herald.

Miami Herald staff writer Mimi Whitefield contributed to this report from Havana.