

Documentary

Patient

When we first meet Nubia Martinez, she is waiting in a taxi cab. A radio broadcast buzzes in the background; the presenters can barely contain their excitement over the new television series of "Colombia's Next Top Model" (one of them giddily repeats the name of the show, as if he has just won the lottery). Nubia is en route to an unnamed hospital. There is more waiting in store for her there, and throughout the film, although she rarely complains.

"In Colombia, a country where the harsh health system requires its users to face absurd bureaucratic obstacles to access its services, [a] patient is not only the one who has the disease but also the one responsible for the daily struggle to ensure that his or her loved one receives all necessary needs", explains director Jorge Caballero on the film's website. His slender and sensitive documentary follows Nubia's ministrations to her 23-year old daughter Leidy, who has a neuroectodermal tumour. The tumour is inoperable, and a mass in her trachea is looking increasingly likely to cut off Leidy's breathing. But, as in war, the moments of terror punctuate lengthy periods of boredom. Nubia spends hours at her daughter's bedside, occasionally glancing at a television set permanently tuned to "Colombia's Next Top Model" (we hear one of the contestants acclaimed as "an example of overcoming"). She sips coffee in the cafeteria, and helps the orderlies to wheel her daughter's bed down the interminable corridors.

Nubia favours her right leg, for reasons we never learn. In the hospital, she limps from station to station, attempting to obtain analgesics, or, later in the film, to fill out the documents that will allow her daughter to be discharged (by this

point, options for treatment have been exhausted). "The paperwork is one click away from printing", says one of the nursing staff, failing to see how such information might be more infuriating than encouraging. The bureaucracy is implacable, and Nubia's resignation and unwavering politeness suggests that she never imagined it could be otherwise. "They told me to talk to one of the nurses here, but you told me to go over there, right?", she asks sweetly. Who could tell that her daughter has only a week to live?

In truth, Caballero has a more balanced perspective than the statement on the website suggests. *Patient* is one part of a multimedia project examining the health system in Colombia, and it finds plenty of cause for hope. The youthful doctors, for example, seem competent and thoughtful; it would have been easy for Caballero to portray them as otherwise. They never talk down to Nubia. They outline Leidy's worsening condition with concise compassion; time is a factor and Nubia is clearly grabbing a few moments where she can, but the physicians are unhurried. The hospital itself is clean and calm, and the radiotherapy ward hums efficiently (although, of course, cancer wards rarely host the same kind of fevered activity as some other parts of the hospital).

The repeated shots of shifting and morphing medical images, counterpointed with Nubia's Sisyphean journey around the hospital, hints at one of the film's most interesting themes. Colombia is a rapidly developing place and is already an upper middle-income country, with ambitious targets to reduce poverty set by President Juan Manuel Santos. Reforms undertaken more than 20 years ago

mandated universal health care. But Colombia retains the bureaucracy of a country at an earlier stage of development and its institutions must catch up with technology.

More than anything, however, *Patient* is a tale of a mother and her daughter. We never see Leidy. Instead the camera peeps into the doorway, or down the corridor, or focuses on the end of her bed. It is a touching and appropriate restraint, one of the many strengths of the film. Caballero keeps his distance. By the closing scenes, Leidy's voice is little louder than a whisper. We hear snatches of Nubia's telephone conversations with her husband and son, the moments in which she is at her least guarded. Early in the film, the mother of another stricken child discusses her experiences with Nubia. "She likes to fight, even with her shadow", she explains. "We argue all the time—right now we're not talking to each other". But she complains with the same gentle pride with which Nubia in turn reveals Leidy's dutiful attitude to treatment. Later, an exterior shot shows Nubia bustling around her daughter's room, framed by one of the twelve windows in view. If we looked in each window, we would hear a different story.

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Jorge Caballero
73 mins, 2015, Colombia

For more on *Patient* see
<http://paciencedoc.com/documentary/?lang=en>

Talha Khan Burki

