GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

STATEMENT

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Statement by Dr. The Hon. Natalio D. Wheatley Premier of the Virgin Islands on Ponce Health Sciences University (PHSU) School of Medicine BVI Inauguration Ceremony

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Address by

Dr. The Hon. Natalio D. Wheatley

Premier of the Virgin Islands

Ponce Health Sciences University (PHSU)

School of Medicine BVI

Inauguration Ceremony

24 March, 2025

A pleasant good day to each and everyone. I recognize the protocols already established.

I especially wish to give a very warm Virgin Islands welcome to our friends from the Ponce Health Sciences University (PHSU); Dr. Gino Natalicchio, President of PHSU, Dr. José Daniel Pérez, MD, MSc, MBA, Vice President of Operations for the PHSU BVI School of Medicine, and Dr. E. Anne Peterson, Dean of the PHSU BVI School of Medicine.

Today is a very monumental day in the history of the Virgin Islands and a milestone in our country's development.

Today, we celebrate the inauguration of the Ponce Health Sciences University (PHSU) School of Medicine BVI, which will commence its first semester on Monday, 28 July, 2025. For the first time, students will be able to study medicine at an internationally accredited medical school located right here in the BVI - at the H. Lavity Stoutt Community College at Paraquita Bay. They will complete the first two years of the programme at the BVI campus, and clinical rotations for the third and fourth years will be done at major hospital systems in Puerto Rico and the United States. On successful completion of their studies, the PHSU's School of Medicine in the British Virgin Islands will award graduate degrees in medicine.

Permit me to emphasise here that these degrees are backed by proper accreditation, as are PHSU's medical programmes in its three other campuses. The BVI School of Medicine has provisional accreditation from the Accreditation Commission on Colleges of Medicine (ACCM) and a provisional license from the Higher Education Licensing Board under the Ministry of Education of the Virgin Islands. The school was also accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. PHSU's programs are accredited by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME), the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH), the American Psychological Association (APA), the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) for residency training, and the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education (ACCME). So, the quality of the degrees that will be awarded are more than assured.

There are quite a number of positive implications from the establishment of this medical school in the Territory for the Virgin Islands and our people. First of all, it makes medical studies more accessible and cheaper for Virgin Islanders who are interested in becoming doctors. Virgin Islanders do not have to leave their homes and their families and go overseas to study medicine. They can do it right here – at least for the first two years – instead of having to pay costs for travel and accommodation abroad. It is our hope that with the lower cost and convenience, more Virgin Islanders will take up the opportunity to enter the field of medicine and to take up positions in our local healthcare institutions – contributing to the healthcare needs of our people and strengthening our capacity within the Territory. PHSU has gone the additional mile to award full tuition scholarships to up to two Belongers each year.

This medical school also puts the BVI on the path to diversifying into edu-tourism. The convenience and lower costs that I mentioned also extends to students and potential students from the United States and nearby countries. Among the 50 students in the first cohort are persons from other countries who have grabbed the opportunity to study in one of the most beautiful vacation destinations in the world. And this trend is expected to continue year after year. By living and studying among us, these students also get the benefit of experiencing and learning about our culture, our society and our history. This is a trending branch of tourism referred to as edu-tourism, and the BVI has the resources and the offerings to do well in this segment of the industry, even as we continue to hold our stake and our share in the traditional segments.

There is nothing a young college student would love more than being able to head to the beach after a tiring day in class; or snorkeling the reefs, sailing around our beautiful islands, or hiking any of our spectacular trails on weekends. And certainly, they will be inviting friends and relatives to join them for long weekends and holidays.

One of our most critical resources now is our increased air connectivity, which the Government has worked so hard to develop. Persons would recall that the Government made a serious push in 2020 to put measures in place to facilitate medical schools being established in the BVI. We were also determined to increase

airlift, particularly with respect to introducing direct flights to the US mainland – which we have achieved, thanks to the Honourable Minister of Communication and Works, Kye Rymer, and his team. Students and their parents, lecturers and administrators want to know that there is quick and easy air transport – and we have it, in addition to the ferries to St Thomas and the US Virgin Islands.

The establishment of this first major venture into edu-tourism, the enrollment of the first cohort of medical students, the assignment of lecturers and facilitators, will have positive implications across the Virgin Islands economy. These persons will need accommodation. They will need vehicles to buy and to rent. They will patronize our restaurants, bars, recreation spots, supermarkets, food vendors, taxis, car and bicycle rentals, tour operators, spas, and more, spurring economic activity with every interaction.

More immediately, PHSU will be restoring two buildings at the HLSCC campus and constructing four class rooms. A dry lab is being built in conjunction with B&F Medical. And there are plans for additional construction work to expand the academic facilities for the medical school to 20,000 square feet. This will create jobs for the local construction sector, and inject funds into the economy.

As more cohorts are enrolled every year, the demand in these and other areas will also increase. And if institutions in other fields and disciplines see the success of PHSU and decide to open campuses in the BVI, there will be even more economic activity and opportunities for the Virgin Islands to prosper.

I sincerely wish to thank PHSU and its parent organization Tiber Health for the confidence they have shown in choosing to locate their fourth international institution here in the Virgin Islands.

The establishment of the PHSU School of Medicine in the BVI will have a deep and transformational effect on the Virgin Islands and is the start of many more great things to come in the future.

I thank you and I wish all current and future students utmost success in their journey to become medical professionals.