



Stories from the American Board of Family Medicine

“We Thrive in Crisis.” How 400,000 Californians Received the COVID Vaccine



Dr. Jerry P. Abraham

From humble beginnings as the son of a nurse's aide in Houston, Texas, Jerry P. Abraham, MD, MPH, CMQ, knew he thrived in chaotic environments. As a young boy, he'd watch his mom in the epicenter of the nurse's station in St. Joseph's Hospital, Houston's oldest hospital and a Catholic charity hospital, directing traffic and helping patients as quickly as they came in. Decades later,

that experience helped lead Dr. Abraham to a career in family medicine where he would unexpectedly affect the lives of countless California residents.

Dr. Abraham, ABFM Diplomate since 2017, drew national attention in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic when his clinic, Kedren Community Health Center, was left out of initial vaccine distribution in Los Angeles. “I noticed federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) like mine, black and brown physicians, private practice physicians, none of us were getting the vaccine. So I picked up the phone and I demanded to know where our vaccines were,” he said. When that didn't work, Dr. Abraham visited the Department of Public Health's warehouse with a news crew to demand vaccines for his patients.

“A week later, we had our first doses,” Dr. Abraham recalled. “Fifty were put in arms that first day, then 100, then 200. It just kept doubling until we were vaccinating up to 5,000 people every day in south Los Angeles. We ultimately vaccinated over 400,000 people in the most vulnerable communities in South and East LA.”

Kedren is not only an FQHC, but an acute psychiatric hospital and Historically Black Institution, as well. In the dog days of the pandemic, it became home to the award-

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winning COVID-19 Vaccine Equity Initiative, which provided care to black and Latino residents when they needed it the most.

“You've got thousands of people waiting outside the gates of Kedren to receive the vaccine, and it reminded me of the story of Noah's Ark. I had to close the gate every day, turn people away from the hospital, and then wake up and do it all over again. It felt endless,” he said.

Speak with Dr. Abraham long enough, and you'll notice his conversation is rife with religious allegory. His spirituality was a north star and source of deep support during the pandemic. “We literally brought in religious leaders to pray with the team every day,” he said. “There were hundreds of staff members involved in the vaccine program at one point, and I was basically running a mega field hospital. I knew it was beyond me, and I needed divine intervention if I was going to get through this.”

But what do you do when the crowds disappear, and everyone interested in seeking out a vaccine for COVID-19 has made that journey? Dr. Abraham's solution was simple. Find the ones you've missed.

“We had to stop standing in the hospital and clinic with our arms folded waiting for patients to come to us. Those sterile white walls have hurt people for so long. Why would they ever trust a doctor with a vaccine after all the discrimination and bias they’ve endured at the hands of the American health care system?” he asked, evoking a skeptical patient.

“‘God only knows what’s in that. You want me to roll up my sleeve when you’ve made me so scared of the government. And you want me to give you my name and date of birth and put me in a registry when I might be undocumented. And you want me to put down an address, yet I’m homeless. You better believe I don’t want anything you have for me,’” he mused. “I knew if we didn’t address the misinformation, disinformation, and all the barriers that stand in the way of people and their vaccines, we were going to miss so many people who most need our help.”

Kedren began a Mobile Street Medicine program which provided vaccines to underserved communities throughout Los Angeles, meeting people where they are at. But this was bigger than just COVID-19. The program expanded by merging with Charles Drew University and began distributing additional vaccines, focusing on preventing HIV and STDs, performing health screenings for hypertension, diabetes, and hyperlipidemia, as well as other necessities like food distribution and addiction treatments to better meet people’s needs in the community.

So, what now? The vaccine initiative worked. The mobile medicine program made (and continues to make) a difference. Where does that leave Dr. Abraham and his team in 2024?

“We thrive in crisis. Now that the ‘emergencies’ have ended, you have to create a sense of urgency for change to really take place. These days, it feels like we’re back to business as usual, and that system kills and harms people. As a result of the pandemic, we now know far too much about health disparities and the medical injustices

our patients suffer through, and it is criminal if we allow things to go back to the way they were – a system that leaves people behind. People act like they already forgot, but we aren’t going to let them,” Dr. Abraham said.

Since 2021, Dr. Abraham has become a bit of a medical celebrity but, more importantly, he’s a source of hope for the disenfranchised and marginalized. Now he’s using that notoriety to draw attention to the needs of black and brown low-income communities and is building up his local public health infrastructure to be prepared for whatever emergency or crisis comes up next. As the first family medicine physician to become president of the Los Angeles County Medical Association, he is setting an inspiring framework that his peers can build upon for years to come.

“How do you integrate primary care, mental health, substance use and addiction services, and public health together to care for the whole person in front of you, as well as help their family and center the needs of the community?” asked Dr. Abraham. “That’s how I approach my work, as a labor of love – as human acts of kindness.”

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