



Cesar A. Aristeiguieta, MD

Dedication, Leadership and Commitment to Serve Those in Need

Dr. Cesar Aristeiguieta recently completed his residency in emergency medicine at the Los Angeles County and University of Southern California Medical Center in Los Angeles, California. “Dr. Cesar”, as his patients know him, brings a unique background to medicine. Born in Venezuela, he emigrated alone to the United States at the age of fifteen seeking better opportunities. After high school, he developed his love for medicine by working as an emergency medical technician and an American Red Cross disaster volunteer. To finance his education, Dr. Cesar worked full-time as a police officer at night so he could attend college full-time during the day. After five challenging years, he received his bachelor’s degree in biology and chemistry from California State University, Bakersfield. At the age of 31, he began his quest to become a physician, enrolling in medical school at the University of Southern California. At nearly 40 years of age, he brings a maturity and passion to his work and career that clearly stands out in the field. He stood out early in his career as a leader, both as a dynamic advocate for patients and for medicine, focusing both on advocacy and improving health in the community. Through his advocacy activities, Dr. Cesar has authored AMA and CMA policy, testified before the California State Senate and Assembly, led lobbying efforts, and increased the participation of medical students and residents at all levels of organized medicine.

A PERSONAL JOURNEY TO ACTIVISM AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Dr. Cesar clearly sees himself as an initiator, an activist. His early activism goes back to elementary school in Venezuela where he volunteered in an effort to paint a local church. While serving in law enforcement he was involved in getting his peers to donate money to help low income children in the area. During medical school, he served on the Board of Governors of the local chapter of the American Red Cross. About four years ago, he became involved in a project to develop a trauma center in Rosarita, Baja California. He was approached because of his fluency with Spanish and his knowledge of medicine. Dr. Cesar has a special interest in issues related to substance abuse, violence and public health. In 1998 as an emergency room physician, he noticed that the ER was serving a large number of victims of automobile accidents occurring on the Los Angeles Crest Highway. In fact, from January 1, 1995 to December 31, 1998 there were 467 traffic collisions resulting in 462 injured and 34 killed. Motorcycles were involved in 47% of the accidents (220), 49% of the injured (226) and 68% of those killed (23). However, motorcycles accounts for only 3% of registered vehicles in California. This represents 20 deaths per 100 million miles traveled – with a state average of 1.6. This stretch of highway was definitely a “killer” and was considered one of California’s most dangerous roads.

Dr. Cesar witnessed a series of injuries and deaths one weekend alone from this highway and could stand no more. He felt comfortable calling the California Highway Patrol and talking with them about what he was observing in the emergency room, wanting to know what they were doing regarding the safety of the road and indicating that he would like to help. What he discovered was that there were efforts underway, uncoordinated efforts between various state and federal agencies, but the injury and death rates were not decreasing. Dr. Cesar decided to go forward with the formation of a community task force bringing together the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), the California Highway Patrol (CHP), the Los Angeles County Sheriffs Department, the USDA Forest Service, and the California Office of Traffic Safety, with local physicians and community groups to craft some coordinated and assertive strategies. The results of their efforts have been dramatic. One year into their community effort, only one fatality and 42 injuries were reported. This represents an 86% decline in expected motorcycle deaths and a 41% decline in expected motorcycle injuries. An estimated \$3,755,000 was saved as a result. Dr. Cesar’s interests are now centered on getting public health messages out through the media – going beyond one-on-one education and reaching large segments of the population. He writes a quarterly article on a health topic for a Spanish newspaper and does an on-camera commentary for a local Spanish network affiliate that broadcasts nationally and internationally to Spanish speaking audiences around the US and world.

VALUES AND BELIEFS ABOUT HEALTH, MEDICINE, AND COMMUNITY-BASED WORK - “Community Work Changes You as Much as You Change the Community.”

He feels that many physicians are unable to see health from this broad perspective because of the specialization of their training. Today’s medical professional training segments the body; rather than nurturing a holistic view of health, it results in the opposite. He feels that medical schools should give more weight to and take into account the medical school applicant’s background and experience in various sectors as well as their passion for medicine. We need more physicians able to understand a broad range of issues affecting family and community health, interested in being involved in their communities, and willing to stand up and be leaders. Physicians need to realize that by just being physicians they can open doors into many worlds, and many organizations.

The role of physician is a recognized position of leadership in American society and should be used by more physicians to serve the community. He strongly feels we need to motivate people early in their lives. The best way to get people involved in their community is to create experiences and role models for them in the formative years of development, as children and teenagers. These role models can come in many ways especially through family, friends, and teachers. Experiences through school and for physicians, through medical school can be personally transforming.

“You go into it hoping to change a life but come out changed yourself, gaining many things you never expect. Once you do a little, you will want to do more. And, it will change you as a human being.”