

A portrait of Vilma M. Vega, M.D., a woman with short brown hair, smiling and wearing a purple dress, a silver necklace, and a bracelet. She is sitting in a chair, and a wooden desk is visible in the background.

Vilma M. VEGA

M.D.

Infectious
Disease
Expert

As an independent physician consultant and owner of Vega Consulting LLC, Dr. Vega wears many hats including the Chief Medical Officer for the Community AIDS Network Florida, an expert on the Zika virus, and co-founder of Hearts Afire, Inc. Her infectious disease background has made her a sought-after commentator and speaker on the Zika virus contracted through infected mosquitos that is especially dangerous for pregnant women.

As an independent physician consultant and owner of Vega Consulting LLC, Dr. Vilma Vega wears many hats including the Chief Medical Officer for the Community AIDS Network Florida, an expert on the Zika virus, and co-founder of Hearts Afire, Inc. As a Board-certified infectious disease physician and Board-certified HIV specialist, Dr. Vega practiced at Infectious Disease Associates in Sarasota for 20 years and continues to see 150 HIV/AIDS patients per month. She has made keynote presentations in the United States and in ten African, Asian, and Latin American countries, participated in clinical research trials, served on pharmaceutical advisory boards and committees, and presented speeches for companies such as Abbott Laboratories and Merck Pharmaceuticals.

Dr. Vega describes the growth of the Community AIDS Network (CAN) Florida, “The first clinic opened 25 years ago in a laundromat behind the police station off of Ringling Boulevard. Twenty-one years ago we opened the clinic on Tuttle Avenue. CAN is the premier and fastest-growing HIV/AIDS non-profit in Florida now serving over 10,000 patients in 24 clinics with a \$60 million budget. The services provide the insured and the non-insured patient with medical, dental, mental health, social service, medications, housing, and facilitating co-pays for services. As Chief Medical Officer, I am deeply involved with the expansion and growth of clinics especially the infrastructure that includes technology upgrades, electronic medical records, protocols, and medical standardization of clinics. My responsibilities also include clinical outreach to all 24 clinics with 65 infectious disease physicians with expertise in AIDS across Florida, relationship-building with physicians, recruiting activities to attract preeminent HIV physicians for the clinics, expanding services including mental health in all clinics, and expanding the Network through construction projects. Challenges arise from the changing politics and national and international health care regulations that get harder and harder and from people who have forgotten to give back in terms of time or money.”

Even though AIDS is not in the press as much as when death was the outcome for most patients, Dr. Vega reports that Florida has the highest number of new cases and 3,000 cases locally. And in south Florida, namely Miami-Dade and Broward counties, there are 20,000 new cases. During the 1990s the death rate dropped when multiple medicines hit the market at the same time with subsequent full life spans for the majority of patients. Dr. Vega emphasizes the word “big” when discussing injectable meds that are administered only every two weeks or once a month. She answers “years away” when asked about vaccines.

In 2011 after practicing with Infectious Disease Associates for 20 years, Dr. Vega was burnt out from the 80-hour work weeks, was living an unhealthy lifestyle, had developed some chronic diseases including high blood pressure and sleep apnea, and was overweight. After a three-month sabbatical, she divested her partnership in the practice and regained control of her life. Now her schedule is about 50 percent direct patient care at a clinic and at the Infectious Disease Associates where she continues to see about 150 patients a month and 50 percent administrative duties for the Network. From a \$14 million budget last year to the current \$60 million budget, the Network participates in the 340B Drug Discount Program that requires pharmaceutical companies to provide outpatient medicine to eligible health care organizations

at significantly reduced prices. Subsequently the Network acquired additional patients due to the ability to purchase medicines for them.

Her infectious disease background has made her a sought-after commentator and speaker on the Zika virus contracted through infected mosquitos that is especially dangerous for pregnant women. There are over 600 cases in Florida with 17 cases from non-travel related causes and 60 in pregnant women with one travel-related case in Sarasota. Symptoms occur five to seven days after being infected. Preventive measures include wearing insect repellent, removing standing water around houses, and covering the arms and legs when outside.

Dr. Vega says her faith is the core of everything she does with daily guidance from her Lord. Her humanitarian efforts include the co-founding and current Board member of faith-based Hearts Afire that provides medical, spiritual, social, and nutrition relief to people that are victims of natural disasters and poverty. The \$2 million budget is spent on equipment and medical supplies. She says the agency has 2,000 volunteers with 50 percent of them being medical personnel who provided services to 60,000 people in the last 10 years. Volunteers provide primary care, parasite treatment, vitamins, nutrition education, lab tests for diabetes and HIV, ultrasounds, glasses, shoes, dental work, surgeries, and baby deliveries. They also built 15 wells and 13 churches in 12 countries including Kenya, Swaziland, Africa, India, South and Central America, Honduras, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.

A more recent endeavor for the personable and thoughtful Dr. Vega is life and executive coaching especially for physicians. “Every physician loves to take care of people, but regulations, technology, and other issues present complete barriers to taking care of patients. I have written the Balanced Life curriculum to help physicians better balance their lives and to support physicians with health care reform. I want to encourage people to learn why they are here and help them accomplish all they were meant to accomplish on earth,” she explains.

A native of Peru, Dr. Vega and her family emigrated to Chicago when she was six months old. Fond of science and having her mother diagnosed with a brain tumor when Dr. Vega was five years old sealed her desire to become a physician. Attending Loyola University on a four-year scholarship, she received her bachelor’s degree in biology with a minor in theology and philosophy, her medical degree at the University of Illinois (where she learned that infectious disease physicians were the “brainiacs of medicine”), and completed infectious disease residency and fellowship at Jackson Memorial Hospital/University of Miami.

Her diplomat father (who is also a physician) was Consul of Peru in Chicago and later in Tampa while her mother was an insurance underwriter. Her sister Sandra is a children’s counselor and therapist, her sister Julie is a child psychologist, and her brother Julio, Jr., is a biologist who teaches elementary school. Dr. Vega’s leisure time is spent writing books, cooking, playing the piano, and Latin dancing (she was a former competition ballroom dancer). Somewhere in the future she would like to establish sustainable freestanding clinics in churches for education and assistance on nutrition, exercise, and financial issues.

When she reaches the end of her life, Dr. Vega would like people, and especially God, to say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

✂ STORY: Carol Darling

✂ IMAGES: Evelyn England