

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED: CARL L. BRUMBACK, MD

This article is reprinted with permission from the Florida Medical Association (FMA) and was written by FMA staff writer Mr. John Tyler. The article was inspired by E. Russell Jackson, Jr, FMA Senior Vice President's visit to Dr. Brumback's retirement residence in Palm Beach Gardens after an FMA meeting in Miami. Dr. Brumback was giving a lecture that day to the people at his residence along with their guests. When Mr. Jackson came in he was talking about the time he provided medical care at Alcatraz during his medical residency at the Marine Hospital in San Francisco, just after graduating from the University of Kansas Medical School. He still had the key from the Alcatraz infirmary. After his lecture, Mr. Jackson asked Dr. Brumback to tell him how he got from Alcatraz to the Palm Beach County Health Department. This article recounts that journey of Dr. Brumback and some of the key events that happened along the way. Dr. Brumback was one of the founders of the American Association of Public Health Physicians (AAPHP) in 1954.



WHEN CARL L. BRUMBACK, MD, graduated from medical school, he could not have known where his life would lead. He quickly became accustomed to taking the road less traveled, forging new paths that today remain vital to public health in Florida. From the halls of Alcatraz to the rubble of post-war Germany, Dr. Brumback's life ultimately led him to Palm Beach County. There, working to improve the lives of the public including indigent migrant workers, he founded a health department that now stands as a model for the nation. Dr. Brumback's great passion for health care and can-do spirit continue to positively affect the lives of others, leaving a legacy that only grows stronger with time.

A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

After receiving his medical degree from the University of Kansas School of Medicine, Brumback headed west to pursue a residency in San Francisco, beginning his career in a United States Marine Hospital. During this period, nearby Alcatraz Island still was housing some of America's most dangerous criminals. Only two physicians worked in the infirmary, and when one of them became ill and had to retire, the marine hospital began rotating residents. "My wife, Lucile, would take me to the pier. She was a real partner to me." Dr. Brumback remembers. "Prison workers picked me up in a boat and took me to the island. Then two guards escorted me through six gates to the infirmary and physician's office." During a shift, Brumback would conduct rounds along "Broadway," the cell block corridor, examining prisoners under the watchful eye of armed guards. During this time, he examined crime figures such as Robert "Machine Gun" Kelly, a notable prohibition-era gangster, and Robert Franklin Stroud, better known as the "Birdman of Alcatraz."



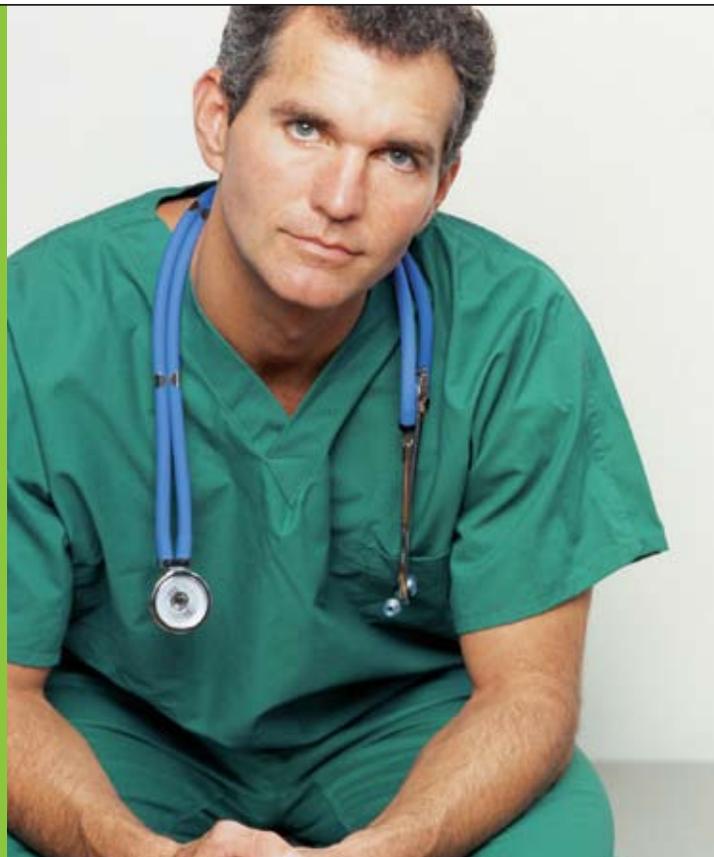
After Brumback worked in San Francisco, he served as a physician in the United States Army in Europe where World War II turned in favor of the Allies, leading ultimately to victory. As a result, the United States Army began discharging soldiers. Unfortunately, they discharged far more physicians than necessary and created a shortage in war-torn Germany. "There were ships sunk all over the harbor," he says. "They loaded us on a train into what they called forty-and-eight cars, because they could hold either forty men or eight horses." The train stopped in Cassel, Germany, where Brumback would take post as Deputy Commander of a military hospital. "Cassel was pretty well pulverized,"

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he says. "There were only a few buildings intact along the outskirts." One of these buildings had served as headquarters to Hitler's Western Commander, who had vacated his office so hastily that he left his epaulets and Nazi insignia behind in their display case. "The hospital commander chose to leave them where they were," says Brumback. "They ended up being quite the conversation piece."

After 16 months in Europe, Brumback returned to the United States and decided to pursue additional post-graduate work at the University of Michigan. There, he received a Master of Public Health degree and developed a passionate interest in providing care to underserved communities. His desire was simple – he wanted to combine the efforts of the public and private sectors, increasing the level of cooperation between physicians and public health workers to create a better system of care. Members of the Michigan faculty alerted Brumback to an opportunity in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, at the Atomic Energy Commission. A Michigan

professor was on his way there to aid in reorganizing the health system and Brumback was invited to join him. After a few months in Tennessee, the two men achieved great results and Brumback became director of the project. Yet, he felt compelled to move on. "I wanted to get out of federal service," says Brumback. "I wanted to get into communities to address health problems affecting people in genuine need."

Aware of Dr. Brumback's work at the Atomic Energy Commission, Florida State Health Officer, Wilson T. Sowder, M.D. recommended him to create a county health department in Palm Beach. "I told him I wanted to tackle every conceivable health problem and develop the resources to do so. He told me this was just the place I was looking for."

FROM THE GROUND UP

Soon after arriving, Brumback became involved in organized medicine. He joined the Florida Medical Association (FMA) and also the Palm Beach County

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Medical Society (PBCMS). Before taking his post at the health department, the PBCMS assembled a committee of physician leadership to interview him. "They wanted to know what my plan was," says Brumback. "I told them that I didn't have one, but I committed to them that we would work together to identify the county's health problems and to identify solutions." Dr. Brumback and the physicians of Palm Beach County were quickly on the same page. He soon became a member of the Palm Beach County Medical Society's Executive Committee and thus began a journey toward building one of the finest public health systems in the country, which has as its foundation a strong partnership between public health and the private practice of medicine.

The immediate challenges were overwhelming. "When I took over as director of the health department in 1950, there were 114,000 residents in the county, and I had a budget of \$92,000," Brumback says. To make matters worse, Palm Beach County had one of the largest populations of migrant farm workers in the nation — roughly 55,000. "There were very few physicians in the area at the time and even fewer specialists. By the time many of the migrant workers received medical attention, their cases were terminal." Their living conditions were abysmal, making homes out of packing crates in sparse labor camps.

Dr. Brumback began taking photographs, documenting the misfortune of the migrant workers. He contacted groups like the Florida Christian Migrant Ministry and organized efforts to raise awareness, funding, and cooperative action. This led him as far as Washington, D.C., where he gave a presentation to a national council of churches and ministries, sharing his photographs and eyewitness accounts of the problem. Although he had no trouble stirring interest in solving the problem, funding was another story.

Then, in 1954, Brumback received a federal grant to study the health of migrant workers that resulted in a book by the study's principal investigator, Earl L. Koos, PhD, head of the Department of Social Anthropology at Florida State University. The book, titled, *They Follow the Sun*, further documented Florida's struggling population of migrant workers. The two men began communicating and sharing ideas.

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"I can still see him," says Brumback. "I can still hear his voice. He listened to us, then he looked at me and said, 'What you're proposing is the wave of the future.'"

"Dr. Koos understood that addressing the problem would require more than medical care," says Brumback. "These people needed aid in every conceivable way, and providing it would require a team effort among physicians, educators, and public health workers."

Dr. Brumback and Dr. Koos approached Elizabeth Peabody, MD, a pediatrician with the United States Children's Bureau, about funding a project. "The woman was a magician," says Brumback, laughing. "She came up with \$250,000 to see what our proposed team could do in Palm Beach County." The team would use two new health centers in Belle Glade to treat migrant workers and their families and ultimately attract attention from Washington. Dr. Brumback's program became a national model, the inspiration for a multi-million dollar federal program to build similar migrant health programs throughout the United States. In 1962, Brumback was appointed as a member of a national committee responsible for supervising these programs to ensure their success.

UNCHARTED TERRITORY

As Brumback fought to improve the lives of migrant workers, he still had a county health department to run. Unfortunately, with limited funding, he had very few obvious resources. "I knew I needed an assistant," he says, "but I did not have the money to afford the quality of physician I needed." This gave Brumback an idea. Rather than looking for experienced physicians at a discount, he developed a residency program, looking to attract talented young graduates from the nation's top medical schools. "It was a strange idea," says Brumback. "Health departments did not house residencies." Nonetheless, he wrote to the national accrediting board and was approved. One of his first residents, James T. Howell, MD, would go on to become the first Secretary of the Florida Department of Health. Another, Jean M. Malecki, MD, now serves as Director of the Palm Beach County Health Department. Under her guidance, the department has grown rapidly, employing hundreds, with a budget of nearly \$70 million. The residency program continues to attract top young physicians from all over the world.



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Many of the groundbreaking programs Dr. Brumback developed over the years in Palm Beach County remain active and have been duplicated by other county departments across Florida. He developed an Environmental Health and Engineering Department to monitor all aspects of air, water, and land pollution. "When I came back in 1950, Palm Beach County had a considerable pollution problem. They didn't have sewage processing, so we organized a system to deliver it and the standards to enforce it."

Every step of the way, Brumback worked to involve private physicians in public matters. Unfortunately, state laws at the time did not permit general medical care in county health departments. Impressed by his success in aiding the migrant population in Palm Beach, a West Palm City Commissioner approached Brumback about developing similar support systems in the county. "I explained to him that we were limited according to the statutes in terms of providing direct medical care," says Brumback. "That kind of program simply did not exist."

The two men traveled to Jacksonville and met with State Health Officer Sowder, explaining their desires. "I can still see him," says Brumback. "I can still hear his voice. He listened to us, then he looked at me and said, 'What you're proposing is the wave of the future.'" Dr. Sowder recommended a waiver from state law, allowing Brumback's efforts to proceed toward revolutionary change for a closer partnership between the public and private sector of health care in Florida.

WAVE OF THE FUTURE

Throughout his career, Dr. Brumback brought "wave of the future" health care to Florida. Serving as Chair of the FMA Public Health Committee, his wisdom, insight, and vision ensured that Florida's physicians were active in public health decisions throughout the state. He also received innumerable awards and accolades, including the American Medical Association's highest honor: the Dr. Nathan Davis Award. Yet, perhaps the most impressive characteristics of Dr. Brumback's career remain his

day-to-day persistence and clear-eyed vision and resilience in navigating uncharted territory and forging new paths.

Even after retiring, Dr. Brumback continued working with the Palm Beach County Health Department Residency Program for fourteen years. Now 95 years of age, Dr. Brumback still lives in Palm Beach Gardens and continues to give lectures promoting the residency program. His goal is to continue the program's tradition of attracting talented young physicians from all over the world. "I only wish more physicians could take advantage of it," says Brumback. Generations of physicians and patients alike have benefited from his contributions to medicine and public health in Florida. It stems from a career devoted to creating better opportunities for others and a lifelong commitment to excellence. Today, the influence of Carl L. Brumback, MD, is undeniable and his extraordinary legacy continues to grow.



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