

WALL STREET JOURNAL

SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA October 24, 2012

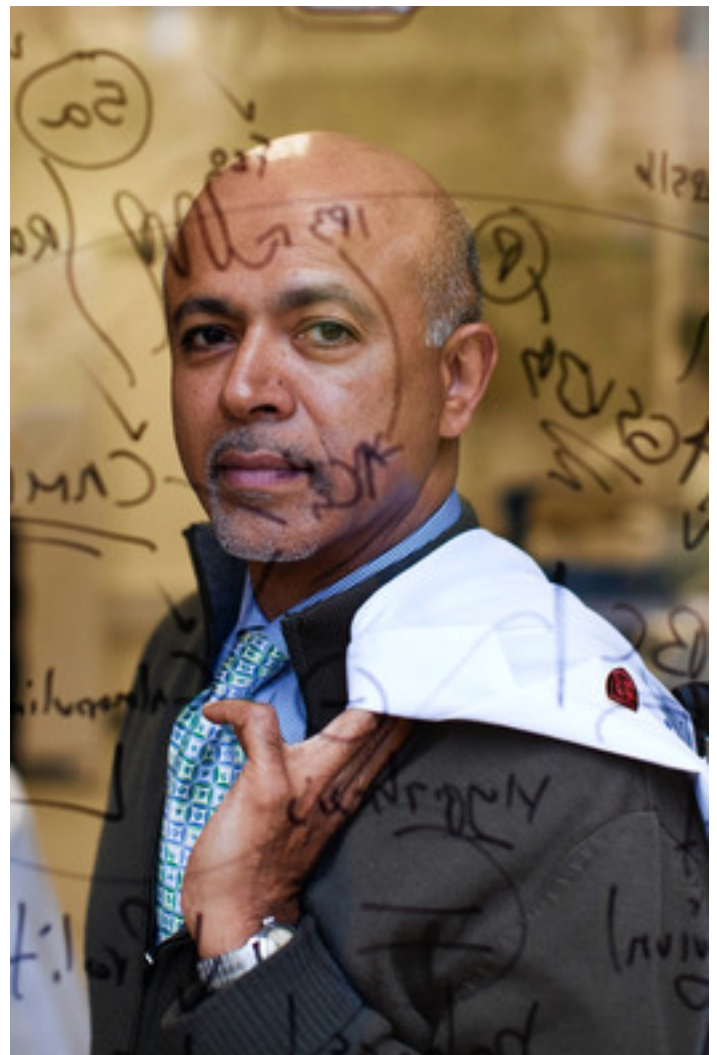
Vergheese, Author and Physician on a Mission

By RACHAEL KING

Stanford University is located in the heart of high-tech Silicon Valley. Abraham Vergheese, a best-selling author and Stanford physician and professor, is on a mission to improve low-tech bedside medicine.

In 2008, a year after being recruited to Stanford, Dr. Vergheese launched an effort to teach the basics of the physical exam. Called the Stanford Medicine 25, the initiative is focused on re-emphasizing the importance of the patient-doctor relationship.

It's a theme centered on personal care that the 57-year-old has espoused in his other work. In Dr. Vergheese's 2009 novel "Cutting for Stone," which sold more than one million copies, he told the saga of twin brothers born in Ethiopia to a British surgeon and Indian nun, who share a fascination with medicine. In the nonfiction "My Own Country," published in 1994, he wrote about the caring for AIDS patients in rural Johnson City, Tenn.



'...I was caught up from the time I was a fairly young boy in what I saw as the romance and passion of medicine...,' says Abraham Vergheese, shown at the Stanford School of Medicine in Palo Alto. Photo: Jason Henry for The Wall Street Journal

Dr. Verghese was born in Ethiopia to parents who were teachers from India. His early medical training was interrupted by revolution in Ethiopia, which set him on a journey that included medical study in India and a residency in Johnson City.

Dr. Verghese recently discussed Stanford Medicine 25, his writing and living in the Bay Area:

WSJ: How did the Stanford Medicine 25 come about?

Dr. Verghese: Many of us recognized that there was a gap between what the medical record claimed was done on the patient, in a sense, and the actual execution of the task. It reflects an increasing dependence on technology and paying lip-service to the actual examination of the patient. My sense was that there's a lot of low-hanging fruit, easy diagnoses that one can make, that people have been making for a hundred years and it would be a shame for us, to have reached this place where the only way we can make certain diagnoses is by ordering expensive and fancy tests when the diagnosis was really there all along for us to see.

WSJ: What's the connection between your work as a physician and your writing?

Dr. Verghese: I don't see myself as wearing two separate hats. I see myself as all physician. I am giddily in love with being a physician.

I went through a lot of hardship to finish medical school and I was caught up from the time I was a fairly young boy in what I saw as the romance and passion of medicine and a lot of that came from books. I've never lost that feeling of excitement. To me, the writing simply represents a continuum of that love of medicine.

WSJ: How did you decide to attend the graduate creative-writing program Iowa Writers Workshop in 1990?

Dr. Verghese: It came about because I was trying to tell the story of this town, Johnson City. There was so much HIV, more than anyone had expected from a town that size.

Yet, when I was trying to tell the story, I realized I needed to be thoughtful about how I told the story. The lesson I was learning from my patients is that life is exceedingly short and the moment is fleeting, and that one should not postpone one's dreams too long, if one can. It's not that I dreamed of writing a best-selling novel but I did dream of telling that story about that town.

WSJ: What do you think about the prognosis for HIV/AIDS patients today, compared with back then?

Dr. Verghese: It's actually night and day. I think most of us who lived through that time, there was a point where we thought it would never end. I lost faith that we'd ever be able to do anything with this virus. When the moment came around 1994-1995, it actually took me by surprise. For closed gay communities like the Castro in San Francisco or the Village in New York or the Fenway in Boston, everyone you knew had been affected and that quality was just unbelievable.

It's hard to convey that now to medical students. When we turned the corner, it was almost a miracle but many of us have this huge sense of loss and depression about all the men who just missed that moment, by a few months or a few weeks even, missed the moment when we turned the corner.

WSJ: Are you working on a book now?

Dr. Verghese: I have a new novel that I'm working on that is set in the south of India and very much some of the themes that are important to me, an epic story. I don't quite know what it's all about yet.

WSJ: When do you write?

Dr. Verghese: I write whenever I can, which varies a great deal. One of the blessings of being at Stanford is that they have treated my writing as my research equivalent. When I was hired, the chair and I came to an agreement where I have a second office where I disappear to write and I get to do that almost two days a week.

WSJ: How is living in the Bay Area different from the other places you've lived?

Dr. Verghese: I have a hard time sometimes believing that I'm actually here. I keep having this impostor's syndrome, the sense that someone is going to tap me on the shoulder and say we made a mistake, you're meant to be in Fairbanks, Alaska. It's extraordinarily beautiful and there's the great privilege of being at Stanford.

Write to Rachael King at rachael.king@wsj.com