

Changing an Island One Person at a Time

Kathy Abascal, BS, JD, RH (AHG) and Her Anti-Inflammatory Diet

Jane Hart, MD

When a person chooses a profession, at least two things are uncertain—whether or not the person will stay in that profession and what impact that person will have in society. In the case of Kathy Abascal, BS, JD, RH (AHG), changing careers—several times—has only increased her impact in society. Abascal, has worked as a chemist/biologist, a lawyer, an herbalist, and now as a leader in providing in-depth workshops on her anti-inflammatory diet, which she refers to as the TQI Diet—or the “To Quiet Inflammation Diet.”

Background

Abascal started out studying neurobiology and biochemistry and worked on clinical research studies and physician quality-control studies for a local hospital. She thought about going to medical school but, instead, completely switched gears and obtained her Juris Doctor from Hastings College of Law in San Francisco. “I worked as a research attorney at the California Court of Appeals for a number of years and then went into private practice specializing in complex consumer litigation, but struggles to really make an impact in the way I had hoped led me to search again for another career,” Abascal says.

This time around she followed her heart, and returned to health care—specifically to the study of medicinal plants. “I moved to New Mexico in 1996, and a significant portion of my time there was spent studying with Michael Moore at his botanical medicine school, and becoming familiar with high-desert herbs and plants and his very holistic approach to herbal medicine,” Abascal recalls. During her time in New Mexico, Abascal met Eric Yarnell, ND, and, together, they formed the Botanical Medicine Academy (BMA), intending to create a certification program for health practitioners who use herbal medicine.

“While working together on the BMA, Eric and I developed a friendship and began writing together,” Abascal says, adding: “We wrote our first joint article for the *Alternative and Complementary Therapies [ACT]* journal at least 10 years ago, and we have since collaborated on such articles, which now appear as a regular column in the *ACT* journal. Eric and I have written books together and continue to have a close friendship; he now lives in Seattle, teaching at Bastyr.”

Yet, as the winds of change continued to call in Abascal's life, she, in 1999, moved from New Mexico to Vashon Island, Washington (near Seattle), to be closer to her mother and established an herbal practice there. “When I first moved here to Vashon, a substantial portion of my work involved writing and research analysis, and I established a local herbal practice on the island and built it over time,” Abascal says.

Things were “going along swimmingly,” but Abascal began having her own health problems leading to yet another shift in her thinking. She remembers: “In 2007, I put on weight and was not able to lose the weight, and I also began encountering my own physical problems that I initially attributed to aging. This led me to start thinking more about my diet, and I gradually shifted my work from a primary herbal practice to a nutritional practice. Once I get enthusiastic about something, I tend to become wildly enthusiastic!”

Abascal's enthusiasm led her to develop classes on her TQI Diet, which is the diet that proved to be incredibly helpful for her. “I just started applying some of the nutritional things I knew I should be doing in my own life but was not,” Abascal admits. She recalls: “When I instantly began losing weight and feeling better and sleeping better, I began teaching small classes on the TQI Diet. When my students began having similar success with their health, the class really started taking off and it became the more definitive focus of my work.” Abascal states that her classes initially had about 5–7 people in attendance for an evening class, but that has grown to about 50 people in a class.

The TQI Diet

The TQI Diet that Abascal teaches people about is based on using food with a focus on addressing the core issue of inflammation rather than focusing on weight loss or a specific medical condition, such as diabetes or high blood pressure. “Certainly there are many paths that can lead to Rome, but inflammation is a factor in every chronic ailment that people suffer from, including weight issues, and if you begin to work on the inflammation piece, you can effectively resolve both health problems and weight issues,” Abascal says.

Abascal offers a 5-week TQI Diet class series, which meets once a week for an hour-and-a-half lecture. Specifics covered in the class include discussions about oxidative stress, essential fats, nutritional requirements for the body, the role of antioxidants, and looking at what happens to the body when it is inflamed and the role of inflammation in disease. “I believe that, instead of focusing on weight, we have to instead ask how inflamed the patient is?” Abascal says. She would probably ask a patient: “How well is your body functioning and how can we start to change that? As you start to become healthier your weight will take care of itself.”

Specifics of the TQI Diet include moving away from sugars and from chemicals and increasing vegetable and fruit intake. The diet does not count calories nor does it limit portion sizes; in fact, a key component is that a person eats until he or she is full. The diet also does not limit fat intake but is rigid about excluding “bad” fats and working on restoring a good ratio of essential fats. The diet requires a breakfast, eaten soon after waking, along with lunch, dinner, and two snacks daily.

“The bottom line is that one has to eat real food,” Abascal says. She explains: “As strange as it may sound, that is difficult for many people to do because they have to chop the food and cook the food and then they have to wash the dishes when they are done.” She states:

I think the magic in helping people lies in—number one—coming up with a simple enough version that people can implement using foods they like to eat, meaning the diet

For More About Kathy Abascal's TQI Diet

Website: www.toquietinflammation.com/

Blog: <http://tqidiet.wordpress.com/>

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has to be functional for somebody who is a meat-and-potatoes person as well as a vegan, or somebody who eats very ethnically. Number two—the person has to have an understanding about what is going on in his or her body and how inflammation works. But the core elements are really focusing on eating real food and a healthy diet.

A New Perspective

The TQI Diet classes taught by Abascal are taught from a different perspective than many other diet classes. Abascal comments: “There are people who really watch their calories, and these people are exercising, but, because they are eating poorly from a nutritional standpoint, they are not losing weight.” She adds: “It is not all about calories and exercise. I think it is probably a myth that, if a person is overweight that person is simply not moving enough and just needs to cut portions a little bit. I think such myths are fostered by a food industry selling poor-quality food, and a lot of people eating that way simply cannot lose weight.”

For Your Patients from Kathy Abascal

CRISPY KALE SERVES 2 TO 4

1 bunch kale
2 tbsp olive oil

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Wash the kale and shake it mostly dry. Cut out the tough center stem, cut the kale into narrow strips, about ¼-inch wide, and put into a large bowl. Pour the olive oil over the kale and toss it to coat. Make sure the kale is well-coated in the oil. Spread the oiled kale strips on a rimmed cookie sheet and bake for 5 minutes. Remove from oven and turn them over with a spatula. Return to the oven and continue roasting for 6 to 7 minutes, or until the kale is crisp. Test it to see if it is ready; you do not want it to burn. When it is done, remove from the oven and sprinkle with salt.

This is a “must-try” recipe. It is the ultimate replacement for popcorn. Crispy Kale has a crunch, then it melts in your mouth, leaving a slightly salty taste. Two variables for success: First, do not mound the kale on the cookie sheet. If you do, it will steam rather than crisp. Second, balance length of cooking time with oven temperature. Temperature varies from oven to oven. You may need to raise the temperature or you may need to shorten the baking time. It is a good idea to stay in the kitchen the first few times you make it, as kale can go from crisp to burnt rather quickly.

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Kathy Abascal, BS, JD, RH (AHG), Vashon, Washington.

Abascal says it is a very different perspective when the need for weight loss for patients is put into the context of “your body is inflamed, and this is something you can change.” She reminds us that this whole initiative began because she followed the science that she understood in order to help herself feel better and wanted to share that with others.

“As practitioners in health care, we are trying to make people feel better; so, having discovered something that felt better, I translated that in an approach that works for me, and the only thing that works for me is when I own what I am doing,” Abascal explains and adds: “I truly believe that it helps to have understanding about what is going on in the body, and how to address it is important, and I think the format that I use has accomplished those two things.”

It is critical for her class participants to understand that the immune system engages any time anything goes awry in the body Abascal says. She adds that class participants begin to understand fully how chemicals, bad fats, and sugars burden the body and trigger inflammation. “Once they learn how essential fats directly affect how inflamed we are, the participants are willing to make changes that balance their essential fats,” Abascal notes and says: “Once they can marry the experience of feeling better and losing weight with the knowledge of exactly why this is happening, the experience is transformative.”

Abascal has written a plan book and cookbook that is currently in print [see *Books by Kathy Abascal*]. “It is basically a book that I will use in classes, but it makes the TQI Diet more available to people who are reluctant or unable to take my class as it will be offered for sale outside of class,” Abascal says.

The group psyche that forms over 5 weeks of class may be an important element for class participants’ success. “There is something about going to the office of a health care provider that, on some level, is a bit disempowering—one is going for advice, one is going for treatment,” Abascal states and continues: “whereas, when individuals get a recommendation to go and take this class, they come, they participate, and they pay, so they own it in a different way. I think the

class structure is critical. I would not expect most people to be able to accomplish the same results simply by reading a book only.”

Seeing Results

Both consumers and medical professionals are taking note of Abascal’s TQI Diet classes largely because of the success that people achieve. Through questionnaires, Abascal tracks how students do over the 5 weeks and she has created a “recipe board,” which is a discussion forum on her website that students can access. Her website has detailed information about her TQI Diet classes, a link to her blog, and testimonials from class participants. “On the website, students can pose questions and post food diaries and results they are seeing in their own lives,” Abascal says. “I get e-mails from people saying, ‘I went to the doctor today and she took me off of Lipitor.’”

Abascal says she always checks in with students and often gets a good response from past students about how they are doing. “It is not enough for a true scientific follow-up study—it is random self-reporting, but I have seen a pretty fair sampling of people being able to maintain progress over years,” Abascal notes. She comments: “So, I am able to get a handle on the fact that my program is quite doable for a significant portion of the people that go through the class, who lose 60 or 90 pounds, and who get off medication and stay off it.”

She continues: “Probably one of the most exciting success stories I know of is a student who began the class at over 300 pounds, was taking between 110 and 130 units of insulin coverage a day for type 2 diabetes, and let me know that after practicing the diet for about 6 months, he was off of all of his medications, had lost weight, and felt great.” Other reports from class participants include: improvements in sleep and blood pressure; increases in energy; reductions in joint pain, acid reflux, postnasal drip, and blood sugar; and other positive effects.

Of course, as with any diet, there are people who do not do as well. Abascal explains: “Some people have multiple food triggers that need to be identified and eliminated from their diets,” and adds: “That requires a real time commitment that a person may be unwilling to make. And then there are those who come because they know they ‘should’ lose weight but who are not really ready to give up comfort foods that they use to self-medicate against the stressors in their lives. Still, even these people walk away with better eating habits than they arrived with.”

Participants who are taking medications, such as blood pressure medication, blood sugar medication, or blood thinners, are required to be followed by a health care professional who monitors these patients. This is because, as Abascal points out, when they get better their drug dosing may need to be modified.

Doctors in the area are also taking note of peoples’ success with the TQI Diet. Abascal teaches her classes in several locations including Highline Medical Center, in Burien, Washington, where Abascal has been encouraged in her work, particularly, she says, by Ronald F. Singler MD, ABFP, the medical director of the Highline Medical Group. “Dr. Singler feels comfortable

recommending my class because it is evidence-based,” Abascal says. She recalls: “He came and took the class, because he had patients who came back to him saying: ‘You should recommend the class,’ but he would respond: ‘I cannot recommend something I do not know about.’ So, he came to the class and liked it so much and he has since taken it again and is a big fan of the results he is seeing in his patient group.”

Dr. Singler comments: “The anti-inflammatory diet course presented by Kathy Abascal puts up-to-date and evidence-based science about our optimal nutrition into practical use. Topics such as inflammatory and anti-inflammatory prostaglandins, food sensitivity and allergy, toxins, leptin, and appetite satiety are presented in a manner that any person can understand regardless of science training.” Singler says that the clinical results he has witnessed in patients who have taken the TQI Diet class are “remarkable-to-astounding” and he adds: “Examples of improvements that I have seen in patients include: lowering of total cholesterol and LDL [low-density lipoprotein] cholesterol; a decrease in inflammatory markers; improvement of diabetes; reduction in arthritis and other pain; clearing of eczema and other skin disorders; improvement in sleep quality; and weight loss that, for many patients, is effortless. I highly recommend the course to my patients, family, and friends.”

Abascal reports that other people in top administrative positions at Highline Medical Center have also taken the class. She says: “As a result of the impact this class has had on people, Highline Medical Center is giving back to the community by helping me offer these classes, and by providing the space and advertising and recommending the class.”

Abascal currently also teaches at Whole Foods Interbay in Seattle, and a few other locations in the greater Seattle area, and offers a live online class, which she says is spreading in popularity across the country. She now has clusters of students in New York, Florida, Minnesota, Hawaii, and California.

Making a Difference One Person at a Time

More than 1500 of the 10,000 people on Vashon Island have taken Abascal’s class, and her classes are even affecting local business. She explains: “We have a local restaurant, Express Cuisine, which now has two menus—it has a standard menu, and then it has an anti-inflammatory menu, which, for instance, does not have white bread on it and people get extra vegetables, and the food is cooked in olive oil instead of butter, etc.”

Abascal also says that islanders who have taken the class influenced the restaurant by asking for items without butter, and for anti-inflammatory foods, and the restaurant responded by providing another menu in addition to its other very popular menu. She comments: “The new menu is simply a response to what people want, since a significant portion of the adults on the island want to eat this way, and the restaurant is working to satisfy consumer interest.”

Jim Riggsbee and his wife, Jocelyn Savoie, are co-owners of Express Cuisine in Vashon Island. Riggsbee comments: “Ev-

Books by Kathy Abascal

The Abascal Way to Quiet Inflammation for Health and Weight Loss

By Kathy Abascal

Vashon, WA: Tigana Press, 2011

Clinical Botanical Medicine

Second Edition Revised and Expanded

By Eric Yarnell, ND, RH, Kathy Abascal, BS, JD,

and Robert Rountree, MD

New Rochelle, NY: Mary Ann Liebert, 2009

Herbs & Influenza: How Herbs Used in the 1918 Flu Pandemic Can Be Effective

By Kathy Abascal, BS, JD

Vashon, WA: Tigana Press, 2006

eryone we speak to who has taken Kathy’s class talks about how effective the diet has been, and a good friend of ours put it well when that friend commented that the anti-inflammatory diet is not really a diet but it’s a lifestyle.”

Riggsbee says that, in addition to its standard menu, the restaurant has offered the anti-inflammatory menu for 2 years now, and that about 25% of their patrons regularly use the alternative menu. “We have both sit-down and take-out services, and many islanders have a long commute and enjoy having high-quality food ready for them when they get home,” Riggsbee adds. He also says that customers who are not actually on the anti-inflammatory diet also enjoy choosing items from that menu.

The biggest differences between the two menus, Riggsbee says, are that the anti-inflammatory menu uses olive oil instead of butter and avoids starch and sugar. Examples of items on the anti-inflammatory menu include grilled salmon with light seasonings and olive oil or grilled chicken breast and a variety of vegetables, including a very popular item that contains roasted butternut squash, yams, fennel bulb, and garlic oil. “This dish is vegetable-based but satisfies the sweet side,” Riggsbee notes.

Other local restaurants and grocery stores have jumped on the bandwagon as well, offering patrons healthier options, and Abascal has received phone calls from farmers at the local farmer’s market thanking her, because people seem more interested in buying items such as kale, purslane, and more high-quality, organic foods.

Abascal wants to take her success nationally, because frankly, she says, we need it. “We are sitting here in a budget crisis, and we are spending a fortune on chronic illness, and if we could get people to eat right, we could dramatically shift both how those people feel and how our country functions,” Abascal says. She concludes: “I have this small pilot group I have worked with and am able to say: ‘This works.’” ■

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