

Lifelines

from the National Cancer Institute



Profile: Dr. Willie Underwood III, African American Prostate Surgeon

By the National Cancer Institute

Dr. Willie Underwood is a man on a mission, literally.

At his day jobs he works as a urologic oncologist, Associate Professor and cancer researcher at the prestigious Roswell Park Cancer Institute, and as Clinical Associate Professor at the SUNY Buffalo School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences. As a volunteer for an international organization called IVUMed earlier this year, he paid his own fare to travel to a town in rural Nigeria. IVUMed works to improve health care around the world through projects that reflect its motto, "Teach one, reach many."

Willie Underwood came to Nigeria to teach. "This trip was the brainchild of Catherine R. deVries, President & Founder of IVUMed, and Dr. Leslie Akporiaye, Medical Director/CEO at the Shawsand Medical Centre. We wanted to help stimulate the efforts to improve cancer outcomes in Nigeria," said Dr. Underwood.

"In Nigeria and many parts of the world," explained Dr. Underwood, "it might as well be the 1970s when it comes to prostate cancer. In the United States 35 years ago, the main way we diagnosed prostate cancer was to wait for men who came in complaining of bone pain. We didn't have a way of diagnosing men before any clinical signs developed. If there were any symptoms men usually ignored them, and so the disease would spread, and was usually incurable by the time we saw it."

Unfortunately, he said, medicine still looks like this in many parts of the world, including the country of Nigeria. At Shawsand, located in a town called Port Harcourt, they have well-trained surgeons, but were not performing radical prostatectomies (surgery to remove a diseased prostate). Nigerians who could afford it would travel to India, England or the United States for treatment.

As a male African American physician, Dr. Underwood knows all too well the impact of prostate cancer on fellow African American men. It is easy to see why he is so passionate about his work and why he would travel halfway around the world to heal others. As a grantee of the National Cancer Institute, he epitomizes the mission of Prostate Cancer Awareness Month.

Travelling Medicine Man

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Dr. Underwood flew to Port Harcourt earlier this year on behalf of IVUMed to perform radical prostatectomy surgery on a local patient, and to confer with surgeons from across the country about the feasibility of creating a prostate cancer program in Nigeria that would improve prostate cancer early detection and survival for their countrymen.

“It was important to respect their autonomy,” said Dr. Underwood. “I had to make sure they didn’t perceive me as the overbearing American expert who was going to dictate how things were going to be done. I knew that learning the technical surgery would be only a small part of the challenge. More important was shaping a context where the Nigerian physicians—not some American—would lead the changes necessary to create and maintain a successful prostate cancer diagnosis and treatment program.”

There was also another challenge, one that illustrates both the complexity of prostate treatment and the importance of the patient’s buy-in—the surgery often has significant side effects. “The culture in Nigeria operates very much by word-of-mouth,” explained Dr. Underwood. Prostate surgery can cause patients to become impotent, or incontinent, where patients leak urine. “The entire project could fail if we didn’t take account of the cultural values surrounding these issues and explain the risks effectively to patients.”

After much discussion and preparation, Dr. Underwood finally met his prospective patient, talked to him extensively, and entered the operating room with two urologists, Drs. John Raphael and Ngozi Ekeke, who would assist him with this historic operation. “These guys had been extremely well-trained in several different specialties. Vascular surgery, urology and gastrointestinal surgery, just to name a few. They were very talented,” he said.

“I have to admit I was sweating a bit more than usual,” said Dr. Underwood. Some of the surgical equipment he normally uses was not available, but there was a bigger surprise. Dr. Underwood was making small talk with the anesthesiologist, waiting for the patient to be put under with a general anesthetic, when he was told the patient had already received spinal anesthesia. In over a decade of surgery on several hundred patients, he had never done a radical prostatectomy on someone who was awake.

“I really had to change gears,” he said. “It was quite a different experience to operate on someone who was talking to me while my hand was in his belly holding a vital organ.” But things worked out fine, for both doctor and patient. Months later the patient seems to be doing well, and Dr. Underwood will return to Port Harcourt later this year, this time in a more consultative role, when Nigerian doctors will perform the surgery themselves.

More than a Surgeon

With funding from NCI and others, Dr. Underwood has been looking at the effects of personality, information-seeking behavior, and knowledge on how African-American men perceive their risk of prostate cancer. Despite being more likely to develop prostate cancer and die of it than other racial/ethnic groups in the United States, African American men generally underestimate their risk and are less likely to receive definitive treatment when diagnosed with a clinically localized prostate cancer.

“That isn’t right, and it’s not acceptable,” emphasizes Dr. Underwood, an alumnus of Morehouse College who knew early in life that he wanted to be a physician-scientist. “We need to build a lot of bridges in this community. As doctors we need to talk in ways that all people can relate to and understand. I’ve been blessed with an extraordinary support system of family and have received great teaching from mentors.”

NCI leads the National Cancer Program and the NIH effort to dramatically reduce the burden of cancer and improve the lives of cancer patients and their families, through research into prevention and cancer biology, the development of new interventions, and the training and mentoring of new researchers. For more information about cancer, please visit the NCI web site at www.cancer.gov/espanol or call NCI’s Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237). More articles and videos in the Lifelines series are available at www.cancer.gov/lifelines.