

Lifelines



from the National Cancer Institute

Dr. Wortia McCaskill-Stevens: An African American Scientist on the Frontier of Cancer Research

By the National Cancer Institute

She is an African American woman and she is a medical doctor, a researcher for the National Cancer Institute (NCI) at the National Institutes of Health. Meet [Wortia McCaskill-Stevens, MD](#), one of the key players behind the scenes when it comes to addressing cancer health disparities.

Recently observed Black History Month is always an ideal time to learn about African Americans who have contributed in all professions, whether they are historical or contemporary figures. For example, we can read about the accomplishments of black medical pioneers like Dr. Charles Drew (who discovered blood plasma) and Dr. Percy Julian (who promoted the use of cortisone to treat arthritis and similar diseases). And many African American medical researchers are making medical history in our society today, including Dr. McCaskill-Stevens.

Her official title is Program Director and Acting Chief of NCI's Community Clinical Oncology Program, and she is the director of and advisor to several additional NCI programs, including the Breast Cancer Prevention and Minority-Based Community Clinical Oncology Program groups and various clinical trials initiatives. Titles aside, it boils down to Dr. McCaskill-Stevens' research passions: breast cancer, including its impact on African American women, and cancer clinical trials, including increasing the participation of African Americans and other minorities.

"Clinical trials provide the evidence for implementing research advances into practice," said Dr. McCaskill-Stevens. In fact, her work has included serving as program director of a large-scale NCI-sponsored breast cancer prevention trial, the Study of Tamoxifen and Raloxifene (STAR). This clinical trial was designed to see how the drug raloxifene compares with the drug tamoxifen in reducing the incidence of breast cancer in postmenopausal women who are at increased risk of the disease. It was one of the largest breast cancer prevention studies ever and took place at more than 500 centers across the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. In the trial, both drugs greatly reduced the risk of developing invasive breast cancer in women at high risk. Both drugs are now approved for breast cancer risk reduction in certain groups of women.

With a mission to help "provide access to clinical trials in institutions that serve underrepresented populations in clinical research and underserved for cancer care," Dr. McCaskill-Stevens adds that new generations of agents that are more targeted to the cancers must also be tested in those "for whom the burdens are the heaviest," including African-American women. (African American women overall are less likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer than white American women but more likely to die from the disease.)

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In the course of her job as a biomedical scientist, Dr. McCaskill-Stevens often gives lectures about the connection between research and health outcomes for women, the recruitment of minorities in clinical trials, and bringing clinical trials “into the community” to audiences of fellow scientists. She sets and reviews strategy for research programs. She also arranges scientific meetings, prepares articles that discuss the latest research advances, and tours sites around the country where clinical trials are conducted. She helps communicate important cancer education and outreach information to minority audiences in media interviews, articles in newspapers and magazines, and also through multimedia venues. In fact, in a recent [NCI YouTube video](#), Dr. McCaskill-Stevens speaks to African American women about what they need to know about breast cancer and breast cancer screening and prevention.

What drives her work? “The possibility that the work that I do can influence many people who develop cancer or are at risk of it and the notion of learning something new every day. It is wonderful to feel that the work that I do permits me to interact with great thinkers in oncology and to think about what the important elements are for providing access to the clinical research that will shape the future of cancer care.”

She is also driven by the desire to interest more African Americans and other minorities in cancer research as a career. “My interest in cancer research developed during the time that I worked as an editor for a science journal prior to medical school. It was during my first year of medical school that cancer research became important to me – primarily because of the passion for breast cancer research and practice displayed by a cancer clinical scientist with whom I worked. This physician became my mentor and helped me to understand the connection between the laboratory and its application to patients – and that one could enjoy it!”

Young African American physicians looking to pattern their own careers after Dr. McCaskill-Stevens’ career should be prepared for a major investment in education. Dr. McCaskill-Stevens’ studies included stints at Washington University, the American College of Switzerland, the Harvard School of Public Health, and Georgetown University, where she earned her MD degree and completed her internal medicine residency. She also served a medical oncology fellowship at the Mayo Clinic. Interestingly, her first jobs were in medical journalism in New York at Time, Inc., and Earl G. Graves Publishing (Black Enterprise magazine).

“In science and for cancer and cancer-related sciences, in particular, curiosity is a wonderful thing to have. When one matches curiosity with hard work, training, and a great mentor, the possible contributions to your communities to the world, and for yourself are endless. “

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 or call NCI’s Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237). More articles and videos in the culturally relevant Lifelines series are available at www.cancer.gov/lifelines.