

PHYSICIAN SPOTLIGHT: Autry Parker, MD

Anesthesiologist saw plenty to gain by relieving pain

Besides photography and tennis, Autry Parker was interested in music as a youngster growing up in Memphis. For a time, he thought he might have a career as a musician. During the summer before he went off to college at Howard University, he played the bass guitar at Libertyland, the amusement park that once existed at the Mid-South Fairgrounds.

But Parker had another childhood dream, and that was to be a doctor. His mother was a nurse. His father was the director of MAP South, the demonstration project for today's WIC program. Parker describes the neighborhood where he grew up in South Memphis as a place where most of the mothers were either a teacher or a nurse, and during that period of 1975 to 1985 almost every child went to college.

"As a child I was told that I was smart enough to be a doctor or a lawyer," he told a writer in 2010. "After I broke my arm at age 7 and underwent a number of operations to save it, the decision was made for me."

Parker is confident today that he followed the right dream. After earning his medical degree from Yale in 1988 and doing his residency and fellowship at Johns Hopkins, Parker eventually gravitated back to Memphis and is now an anesthesiologist at Semmes-Murphey Neurologic & Spine Institute.

At Johns Hopkins, Parker was chosen as the first Blaustein Pain Fellow.

"Yale requires an MD thesis," he said, "and I did it on PCA (patient controlled analgesia). It may be well established now, but at the time it was somewhat controversial. That got my interest in pain management, and I chose anesthesiology."

Parker's first job was to develop the Center for Pain Management at Johnson City (Tennessee) Medical Center. He hadn't planned on returning home to Memphis, but that's the way it worked out.

"Initially, like most of my contemporaries from my neighborhood, I did not plan to return," he said. "However, with maturity, one realizes that home and family are the most important things. Also, Memphis is a city with many assets. A wonderful place to raise your children, reasonably priced housing and friendly people."

The doctor is gratified by "helping people get their lives back," and doing so at Semmes-Murphey has seemed like a good fit.

"I always had an excellent working relationship with Semmes-Murphey," he said, "and I like to think that they have always respected my work. It made perfect sense when healthcare reforms made solo practice more difficult."

Parker primarily sees patients with back and neck conditions, and it's common knowledge what a difficult challenge backs can be for the physician.

"Though we can't fix every backache, we now have a comprehensive armamentarium of diagnostic and therapeutic tools to treat severe back pain," he said. "We offer everything from physical therapy to injections to surgery."

Since Parker entered the field, he has seen encouraging advances.

"One area has been in the area of neuromodulation," he said. "We can implant a neurostimulator in the spinal canal that can modulate or block the pain signal without the need for medications."

In terms of an interesting project that Parker is working on, he cited a treatment for degenerative disc disease that he is developing.

"It may offer a new, novel approach for treating upwards of 40 percent of chronic low back pain," he said. "I hope to be starting clinical trials in the next few months."

A moment of pride for Parker came, he said, when "the first patient treated with the new disc therapy came back after a year without recurrence of low back pain."

What can the general public do to improve their back health?

"Unfortunately, we know now that genetics plays a major role in developing some types of low back pain," he said. "However, the one thing is simple: lose weight and exercise."

For all that he has done in the healthcare field, in his personal life Parker considers his biggest accomplishment "raising three smart and accomplished young women."

Of the three daughters, one is a premed major. His wife, Denise, works at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital as a coordinator for outside services.

In his spare time, Parker still plays the bass guitar.

"I love to play," he said. "I play at church most Sundays and I pick up gigs from time to time. I describe myself as a competent hack."

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