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Keith Black, The Surgical Lifesaver

By CURT SCHLEIER

Keith Black doesn't think you can sit back and rest on your laurels — at least not in his job.

He's one of the world's most renowned neurosurgeons, one of the few who specialize in brain tumors.

Black chairs the Neurosurgery Department at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles.

He has won significant awards such as the Charles M. Drew Medical Society President's Medal of Honor and the Richard F. and Eleanor W. Dwyer Award for Excellence in Cancer Research.

Black, 51, maintains a grueling schedule of 250 surgeries annually in addition to his administrative duties.

In a telephone interview, Black makes the analogy to a jet pilot.

"You have to keep your hours up so you maintain proficiency, not so much in routine situations but in (unusual emergencies), where you have to react almost instinctively, when you don't have time to read the manual," he said.

Facing Danger

Black often works on patients who've been turned away by other doctors who diagnosed the tumors as inoperable. "If we can find a unique corridor to get into the brain in a way that doesn't harm the patient and can extend their lives, those are the patients we tend to offer surgery for," he said.

Fear of failure? He says he doesn't pose that question when facing potentially dangerous operations.

"You have to walk the line," he said. "You have to stay right at the edge of the envelope, at the interface of risk and reward. It cannot be about the surgeon's ego: Can I do this incredible case? You have to have a tremendous respect for the enemy, for the cancer or tumor you're up against. You've got to realize how quickly things can turn from good to bad."

Black always offers patients an honest diagnosis.

"That's why the patient is coming to see you," he said. "They're not coming to you to tell them what they want to hear; they're coming to you to educate themselves and to get the best opinion that your experience and knowledge can provide. I try to treat every patient like I'd treat my mother. If I take my mother to a doctor, I'd want her to know what (he or she) really thinks."

The truth is, for virtually all of his patients, even success is just a respite from the inevitable. Although a few patients

live as many as a dozen years after surgery, most get only a year or two of extra life.

That can be depressing. Yet Black turns negatives into positives. He prefers to concentrate on patients' strength, how they cherish what time they have. "People can live a lifetime in a year," he said.

Black came to neurosurgery from segregated Auburn, Ala., where his father, Robert, was the principal of a black elementary school. The senior Black was a no-nonsense educator who introduced language classes to fourth-graders.

When his son expressed an interest in science and medicine, Robert encouraged him. He even brought home a cow's heart from a slaughterhouse for his son to dissect.

In order to avoid the segregated high school in Auburn, the African-American family moved to Cleveland. Through a friend, young Keith landed an unsalaried position as an assistant tech in a lab researching heart-valve replacements on dogs and doing transplants on the animals. His job was mostly scut work — washing lab glassware and cleaning up. As he wrote in his memoir, "Brain Surgeon," "That didn't matter to me. I was in the lab at last."

After graduating from high school in 1975, Black was accepted into a program for bright students at the University of Michigan.

After receiving his degrees in 1981 and adding five years of an internship and residency at Michigan, he went to UCLA as an assistant professor. He rapidly rose through the ranks to a full professorship in 1994, in part because he was always open to new ideas. One of them was a novel approach to accessing hard-to-get tumors — by entering the brain through the nose or mouth.

Black also worked on the communications side. He saw a disconnect between researchers in the lab and doctors at the bedside, so he pushed to create a continuous loop where doctors in the field could learn what was happening in the lab and vice versa. He wanted to set up what he called "a mini-Manhattan Project."

But that was costly. So the doctor put his money where his mouth was. He shelled out \$10,000 and commissioned a business plan for the research facility he envisioned.

"If you believe in a concept," he said, "that is probably your best investment."

UCLA's senior managers liked the idea, but they didn't have the money to set up the research facility.

Enter Cedars-Sinai. It bought into his idea and, in 1997, signed him up, in part because of Black's reputation. The hospital soon raised money from donors and created the Maxine Dunitz Neurosurgical Institute.

Aiming For A Triumph

Shlomo Melmed, senior vice president of academic affairs and dean of the medical faculty at the hospital, told IBD: "Dr. Black epitomizes the ideal expert physician-scientist who embodies outstanding clinical care with cutting-edge translational science."

Black's team of doctors and researchers followed up on his ideas fast. In just a few years, the group developed a way to inject cells from a body's immune system near tumors. It's a step toward what he calls the perfect "anti-tumor juice."

"The war against cancer is really a series of skirmishes," Black said. "You have to keep your eye on the goal, but it's nice to have intermediate victories."



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