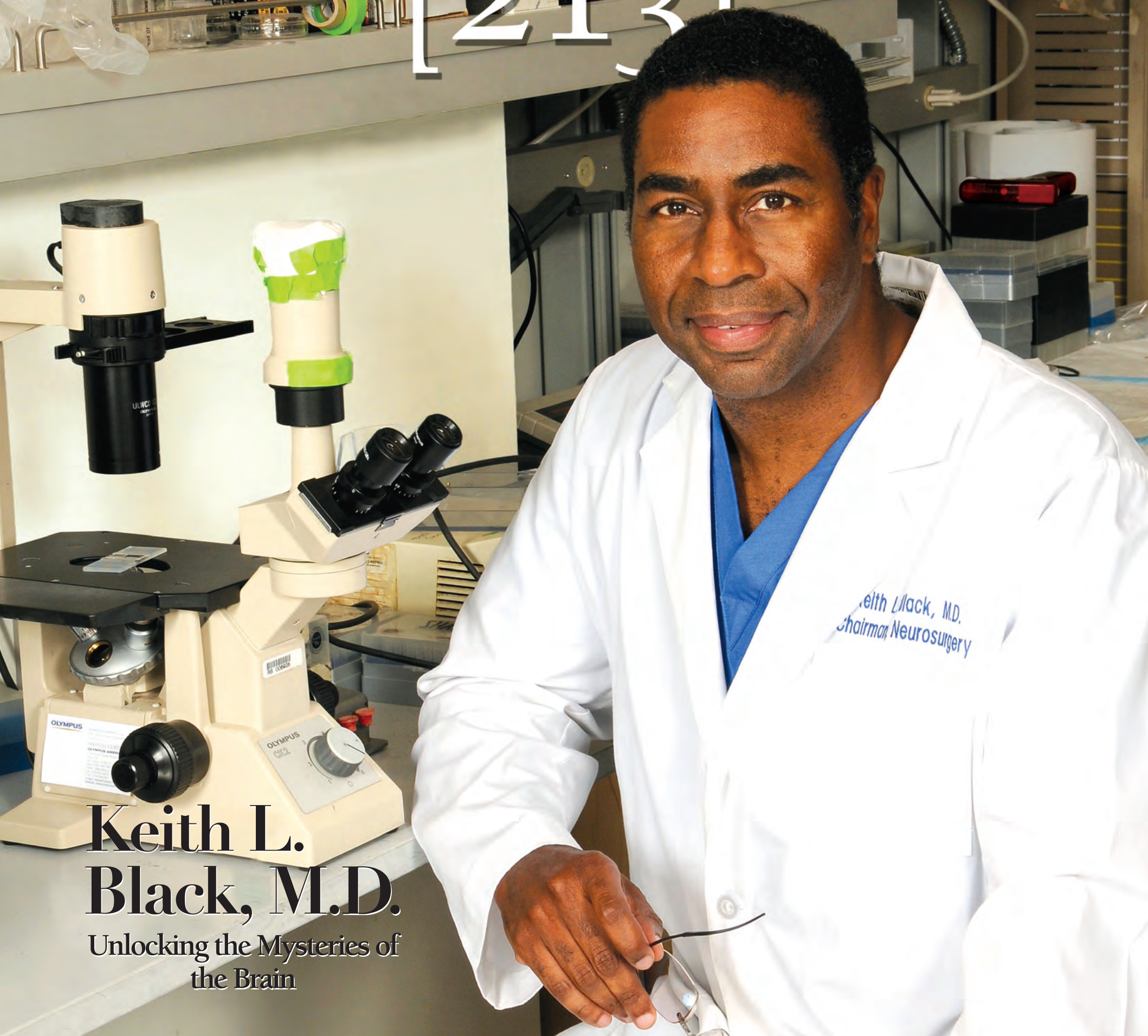


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**Keith L.
Black, M.D.**
Unlocking the Mysteries of
the Brain



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Unlocking the Mysteries of the Brain

Photography by Maxine Picard

When Bryan Bishop was diagnosed with a brain tumor last Spring, the doctor told him and his fiancée Christie to get their affairs in order. He had 6 months to a year to live. “Dr. Doom”, as Christie refers to him in her harrowing blog about their battle against cancer - aninconvenient-tumor.com, didn’t give Bryan a chance.

Not being a couple that backs down easily from a fight, they looked everywhere for a doctor who would believe they had a chance, and the same name kept popping up everywhere they looked: Dr. Keith Black, Chairman of the Department of Neurosurgery and Director of the Maxine Dunitz Neurosurgical Institute at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

Dr. Black is clearly recognized as the world’s most renowned brain tumor specialist in the country; he’s performed over 5,000 operations for resecting brain tumors (averaging over 250 operations per year), was featured in Time Magazine’s “Heroes of Medicine”, and was profiled on the PBS program “The New Explorers” in an episode called “Outsmarting the Brain.”

Despite his accomplishments, Dr. Black prefers to focus on the ultimate goal: to discover and defuse the complex and intricate biological mechanisms that enable malignant brain tumors to mushroom. Dr. Black spoke recently about exciting new developments he’s been working on and recent discoveries about the nature of brain tumors.

“Here at Cedars-Sinai, we are really the first to use the dendritic cell vaccine to treat malignant brain cancer,” Dr. Black explains. “I believe that if we can mount an effective immune response we’ll have the ability to eradicate and destroy it. That’s what we’re doing with this vaccine.”

They have taken this vaccine to the most aggressive brain tumors and have already seen incredible results.

“We can improve the survival to 2 years, from about 8% to 42%, and, in about 6% of the patients, we can activate the immune system against the cancer. We’re beginning to make baby steps. The balance is starting to shift from the tumor to the immune response.”

Black has served on the UCLA faculty for ten years, where he was a professor of neurosurgery, and has been involved in treatment of the brain since the 1970s.

What attracted him to this field in the first place?

“For as long as I can remember, I was interested in how life worked,” Black explains. “Even in my earliest memories as a child, I always had an interest in science.”

In a telling passage from his recent book, “Brain Surgeon: A Doctor’s Inspiring Encounters with Mortality and Miracles”, Black recalls an incidence from his childhood that underscored how much his parents supported his interest in science growing up.

While playing with his new chemistry set, the 8-year-old was in the process of heating some chemicals on the stove.

He writes: “All of a sudden flames shot out of the pot and the mixture exploded with a great flash and boom. The power of the blast threw me across the room...my mother’s immaculate kitchen was in shambles.”

When his father walked in and saw the destruction Black had caused, all he said was, “Been working on your chemistry set?”

It was that kind of encouragement that led to Dr. Black’s current position as the pre-eminent surgeon that he is today. But with the multitudes of diseases and health issues to choose from, what about the quest to understand the brain interests Black so much?

“I think it’s the ultimate quest of man,” Black says. “Since the beginning of our history, we’ve always asked why? Why are we here, how did we get here, and who are we? The ultimate understanding of who we are is understanding our consciousness. Once I started studying the anatomy of the brain, I fell in love.”

The Maxine Dunitz Neurological Institute has the agility to quickly translate new techniques and technologies into patient care. As their discoveries spread throughout biotechnology companies, the institute is attracting new funds for future exploration. The Brain Trust, a community organization that has supported the institute’s research efforts since the beginning, has raised about \$11 million, and Black and the institute’s research currently receive National Institutes of health grants totaling nearly \$2 million per year.

While much of his time is spent examining research or studying microscopic creatures, Black keeps an eye on the bigger picture: the patient who is dealing with one of the scariest things that can happen to you. His calm demeanor, matched with his unparalleled knowledge of the brain, can seem like God-send to someone who has just gotten that terrible diagnosis.

Christie writes about her first experience with Dr. Black, not long after receiving that terrible prognosis from the other doctor:

“Immediately after walking inside Black’s office, we were whisked away into an exam room. We barely had time to breathe before Black walked in, bringing with him his sense of Zen and purpose. Whatever news we were about to get, we felt much more comfortable getting it here than anywhere else. We loved our new doctor immediately. It had been exactly one week since Dr. Doom’s diagnosis and we were ready to start chemo and radiation...we were ready to kick some tumor ass. Thankfully, by the grace of God or whatever else is out there, we have the right medical team to do it.”

- ADAM ALBRIGHT-HANNA