

E. LATUNDE ODEKU: THE FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN NEUROSURGEON TRAINED IN THE UNITED STATES

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THE ADVANCES OF the Civil Rights movement in the mid-20th century and the success of the first African-American neurosurgeons trained at the Montreal Neurological Institute have led to a number of African-Americans receiving neurosurgery training within the United States. Unfortunately, the details regarding the first African-American neurosurgeon trained in the United States, E. Latunde Odeku, have largely remained in obscurity.

Born on June 29, 1927 in Lagos, Nigeria, Dr. Odeku received his M.D. from the Howard University College of Medicine in 1954. He spent the next year at the University of Michigan under the tutelage of Edgar A. Kahn, chief of neurosurgery, and was impressive enough to be offered a residency position. From 1956 to 1960, he trained under Dr. Kahn at the University of Michigan. In 1961, he returned to Howard as a member of the neurosurgery faculty, during which time he became the second African-American to be certified by the American Board of Neurological Surgery. Although he received multiple job offers in the United States, he chose to return to Nigeria where he worked tirelessly, providing excellent neurosurgical care and discipleship until his death in 1974.

The diligence and intelligence of E. Latunde Odeku, M.D., F.A.C.S., enabled him to become the first African-American neurosurgeon trained in the United States. A truly global pioneer, his selfless service in America and Nigeria opened the door for people from each country to enhance the field of neurosurgery.

KEY WORDS: African-American neurosurgeon, American Board of Neurological Surgery, E. Latunde Odeku, Edgar Kahn, Howard University College of Medicine, University of Ibadan College of Medicine, University of Michigan

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The opportunities afforded by the advances of the Civil Rights movement in the mid-20th century along with the success of the first African-American neurosurgeons trained at the Montreal Neurological Institute have led to a number of African-Americans becoming physicians and receiving neurosurgery training within the United States, including prominent figures such as Keith L. Black, M.D., Nelson M. Oyesiku, M.D., Ph.D., F.A.C.S., and Benjamin S. Carson, Sr., M.D. (5, 8, 9). A key pioneer in opening the doors of opportunity presently available to African-Americans in the field of neurosurgery is E. Latunde Odeku, M.D., F.A.C.S., the first African-American to receive neurosurgery training in the United States (1, 5). Unfortunately, the details surrounding his life, medical training, and career have largely remained in obscurity. To address this void, the authors detail Dr. Odeku's impact in this report. Information was gathered from a comprehensive review of pertinent modern and historical records spanning the past century, in both print and electronic form.

Biography

E. Latunde Odeku, M.D., F.A.C.S., (Fig. 1) was born on June 29, 1927 in Lagos, Nigeria (1–2). During his preliminary education at Methodist Boys High School in Lagos, Dr. Odeku demonstrated phenomenal aptitude. In 1945, he passed the London Matriculation Examination as a high school student, scoring higher than many of his teachers who took the examination during that same year (3). He finished high school with the highest marks in biology, chemistry, English, geography, and history. Because of the doors opened as a result of his excellence, he was able to emigrate to the United States in 1947, matriculating at Howard University in Washington, D.C. to receive his undergraduate education (1, 3). Majoring in zoology, he received his Bachelor of Science degree in 1950, graduating *summa cum laude* as the valedictorian of his class (1, 6). He subsequently matriculated at the Howard University College of Medicine on an academic scholarship, receiving his M.D. in 1954 as a member of the Kappa Pi Honorary Medical Society, an award granted to the top 10% of Howard University's med-

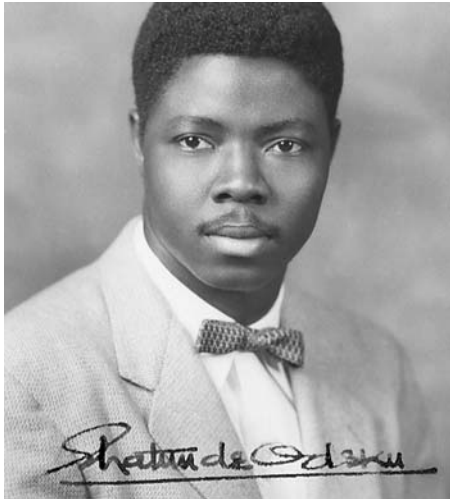


FIGURE 1. Photograph of E. Latunde Odeku, M.D., F.A.C.S., the first African-American neurosurgeon trained in the United States and the Father of Neurosurgery in Black Africa. Courtesy of the American Board of Neurological Surgery.

ical school students, and finishing third in his medical school class (1, 2, 3, 6).

From July 1954 through June 1955, he spent a year as an intern at the University of Michigan under the direction of Dr. Edgar A. Kahn, the chairman of neurosurgery (3, 6). His performance was so outstanding that Dr. Kahn promised him a neurosurgery residency position at Michigan whenever he desired (3, 6). After spending the following year in Nigeria as a medical officer at the Lagos General Hospital, he returned to the United States and trained under Dr. Kahn from 1956 to 1960, and, according to Dr. Kahn, finishing his training in an "outstanding manner" (1, 2, 3, 6).

After his residency, he spent the next year at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C., training in neuropathology under Dr. Webb Haymaker. He spent the following year studying pediatric neurosurgery at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia under Dr. Eugene Spitz, creator of the famous Spitz-Holter valve for treating hydrocephalus (3, 4). In the fall of 1961, he returned to Howard as an appointed Instructor of Neuroanatomy and Neurosurgery at the College of Medicine (3, 5). While serving on the faculty at Howard, he became the second African-American to be certified by the American Board of Neurological Surgery, passing the examination "with flying colors" on November 16, 8 years after Dr. Clarence S. Greene, Sr. became the first African-American board-certified neurosurgeon (1, 5, 6, 9).

During this time, Dr. Odeku was offered at least two excellent academic neurosurgery faculty positions in the United States; however, he chose to turn them down to return to Nigeria in 1962 at great monetary and personal sacrifice (6). Heavily recruited by medical schools in both Ibadan and Lagos, Dr. Odeku came to the University of Ibadan in 1962 as

the first neurosurgeon of West Africa, bringing with him many expensive neurosurgical instruments he had purchased at great personal expense (1, 3, 6). His first patient, referred to him by the chairman of Department of Surgery on October 23, 1962, was a 12-year-old boy with a brain tumor. Dr. Odeku's successful resection of the tumor, which was witnessed by the general surgery chairman, marked the genesis of the neurosurgical unit in Ibadan (3). The next year, Dr. Odeku was appointed as senior faculty and became a fellow of the American College of Surgeons (1). His continuous devotion to patient care along with his disciplined and highly developed surgical conscience made him a legend, appropriately establishing him as the Father of Neurosurgery in Black Africa, and overcoming the deep-seated British-indoctrinated prejudice in Nigeria against American education (1, 3, 7). Two years later, in 1965, Dr. Kahn came to the University of Ibadan for several weeks to join Dr. Odeku in performing a number of neurosurgical operations and lectures and invited him to contribute a chapter to the textbook entitled *Correlative Neurosurgery* (3). During this year, Dr. Odeku was appointed as a full professor; from 1968 to 1971, he served as the head of the Department of Surgery and the Dean of the University of Ibadan College of Medicine at the faculty's request (1, 6). His tireless and pioneering efforts led to the founding of the National and West African Postgraduate Medical Colleges and the initiation of the swearing-in ceremony and commencement address at the University of Ibadan College of Medicine, two traditions presently performed in all Nigerian medical schools (3). Known as a legendary teacher and clinician, with the ability to quickly ascertain essentials in diagnosis, he inspired and brought hope to many through his selfless provision of neurosurgical care (1). Not satisfied with his excellence in these areas, he also made a multitude of contributions to the neurosurgical literature, publishing 61 articles in peer-reviewed journals over a 12-year span (Table 1).

Unfortunately, Dr. Odeku died at the age of 47 on August 20, 1974 from diabetic complications, leaving many of his ideas unfulfilled; yet, during his last days, he never lost his good humor or his gift of lively conversation (1, 3, 6). The extreme humility and humanity he demonstrated throughout his life won him many friends and admirers in American and Nigeria, and made the void created by his passing all the greater (1). As Dr. Kahn himself noted, "It is difficult in this country to assess the loss of such a man to a developing country like Nigeria" (6). His example enlightened many in Nigeria regarding the field of neurosurgery and inspired several physicians into pursuing neurosurgery as a career, most famously Dr. Oyesiku. As a graduate of the University of Ibadan College of Medicine just 5 years after the passing of Dr. Odeku, Dr. Oyesiku went on to complete neurosurgery training at Emory University. He currently serves as Professor and Vice-Chair of the Department of Neurological Surgery at Emory University, and, in October 2004, he became the first African-American president of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons.

TABLE 1. Contributions of E. Latunde Odeku to the neurosurgical literature during his time providing neurosurgical care in Nigeria

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CONCLUSION

The diligence and intelligence of E. Latunde Odeku, M.D., F.A.C.S., enabled him to overcome incredible odds and become the second African-American board-certified neurosurgeon and the first trained in the United States (University of Michigan). A truly global pioneer, his selfless service in America and Nigeria opened the door for people from both countries to enhance the field of neurosurgery. His tireless provision of neurosurgical care and discipleship is a worthy example for all physicians to emulate.

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COMMENTS

Professor Odeku was an inspiration to many, including me. He was a pioneer and a brilliant, hard-working, personable man of con-

science. I take particular pride in the fact that he was the first African-American neurosurgeon trained in the United States and that we have similar roots; we were both born in the same town in Western Nigeria. Secondly, he was Professor of Neurosurgery and Dean of the Medical School at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, which I attended. He was not just "a first;" he was also an outstanding medical student, resident, and neurosurgeon, as attested by his exceptional academic record and performance during his tenure. His reputation is still the stuff of legend, even today, 30 years after his untimely death. This testament is well-deserved and should inspire generations to come.

Nelson M. Oyesiku
Atlanta, Georgia

The authors present a concise and well written biographical note on the first African-American neurosurgeon trained in the United States. Of particular note is his choice to return to Nigeria despite being offered not one but two academic positions in the United States. In his short lifetime, his legendary career established him as the "Father of neurosurgery in Black Africa," based on his neurosurgical practice, skills, teaching, and prolific contributions to the neurosurgical literature. In Africa, his achievements raised the influence and stature of American neurosurgical training compared with traditional British training.

Lycurgus M. Davey
New Haven, Connecticut

This is an informative and inspiring article about an obscure but significant pioneer in the field of neurosurgery. I remember seeing a portrait of Dr. Odeku hanging on the wall in the neurosurgery department at the University of Michigan when I was a medical student there. It was clear that he had been greatly admired. He had died just the year before I did my first neurosurgery rotation as a third year student. Perhaps even greater than his surgical and intellectual talents was his humanity. He bypassed a comfortable living in the United States to bring state-of-the-art medicine and enormous self esteem to countless people in Nigeria and throughout the African continent. I think we can all be very proud to have such a man as a member of our profession.

Benjamin S. Carson
Baltimore, Maryland

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