

Leadership in Action

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The physician was in Nairobi, Kenya participating in a scientific conference and while there, he assisted with a clinic in the countryside to help individuals with heart related ailments. A young girl came through with severe congenital heart problems. While her problem could have been easily addressed back in the United States where he was a practicing cardiologist, he did not have the ability to help her in her native land. In broken English the girl's mother asked, "Can you help us doctor?" He immediately replied that he would; however, the reality was that there was no easy solution to the plight of this young girl. That pivotal moment inspired him to form a non-profit organization called Heart to Heart which funded life-saving heart procedures for people from around the world including the young girl met in Nairobi that day.

This physician is Dr. Herman Taylor, and this story is an example of the kind of leader he is and his passion about making a difference. Dr. Taylor serves as principal investigator in the landmark Jackson Heart Study which is a long term population study by The University of Mississippi Medical Center (UMMC), Jackson State University, and Tougaloo College. The purpose of the study is to characterize risks for cardiovascular disease in African-Americans. The study is following over 5,300 African-Americans in Jackson, and in addition to medical analysis, investigators are also analyzing lifestyle factors such as diet, stress, community and church involvement. The study recently celebrated its tenth anniversary of the first participant testing, and it is funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) through 2013.

Dr. Taylor has an impressive and interesting background. He grew up in Bessemer, Alabama, the son of a schoolteacher mother and steelworker father. His academic success led him to Princeton for his college education and Harvard Medical School for his medical training. While serving in Liberty City, Florida as a general practitioner and treating a diverse patient base, Dr. Taylor saw the realities of the disparities in healthcare in this country, particularly as it relates to heart disease. In addition to what he had seen first-hand, studies supported the fact that African Americans had 3-5 times the rates of death from cardiovascular disease than other U.S. population groups. This reality and a passion for serving people led him to obtain his advanced training in cardiology at the University of Alabama-Birmingham. After completing his training, Dr. Taylor remained on faculty at UAB as a professor and staff cardiologist. As he continued to see the devastating results of heart disease, he began to focus on solving the problem of how to prevent heart disease in the first place. In 1994, the NIH awarded his efforts in preventive cardiology and provided him the support to begin rigorously studying how to enhance preventive health care for heart disease.

During this time period, Jackson, Mississippi was one of four communities participating in the Atherosclerosis Risk in Communities (ARIC) Study. This was important because the ARIC study proved that Jackson would be a good place to do long term health care studies. A number of local leaders in the late 1990's including Dr. Dan Jones (now Chancellor at the University of Mississippi), Dr. Wallace Conerly, UMMC vice chancellor emeritus for health affairs, former Tougaloo President Dr. Joe A. Lee, and former Jackson State President Dr. James E. Lyons Sr. were instrumental in putting together the Jackson Heart Study. Dr. Jones recruited Dr. Taylor to be the principal investigator for the Jackson Heart Study in 1998. As Dr. Taylor said to me, "While my family and I

were comfortable in our life in Birmingham, I knew this was a historic study that would be important in helping address a pressing national health need. The opportunity to serve in this capacity was very compelling, and it led us to make Jackson our new home."

While the study is tracking an African American population, the findings regarding heart disease have implications for all people groups around the world. The results of long term studies like these take time to unravel since these are very complex issues; however, the analysis is already yielding a lot of scientific data that is being published and woven into preventive health care. Dr. Taylor also emphasized that, "one of the unique aspects of this study is the community involvement and the partnerships with UMMC, Jackson State, and Tougaloo." Students from these institutions are getting "hands on" training through the Jackson Heart Study which is providing education and practical experience for tomorrow's leaders. The study is based at the Jackson Medical Mall, and it is a collaborative effort with leading academic centers around the world including Harvard, Johns Hopkins, University of Michigan, the Mayo Clinic, and Morehouse School of Medicine.

The Jackson Heart Study and its findings will have a significant impact on health care in Mississippi and around the world. The economic costs of heart disease are significant, and the ability to reduce these costs through preventive measures including diet and lifestyle will have a major economic and social impact on the state. In addition, the Jackson Heart Study is incubating tomorrow's leaders to prepare others to follow in the footsteps of pioneers like Dr. Taylor. As Mississippians, we should be encouraged that we have the opportunity to make this impact on the future of medicine.

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