

The First Black Woman in Urology in the United States



Efe Chantal Ghanney Simons and Carol J. Bennett

EARLY YEARS, JOURNEY INTO MEDICINE & DISCOVERY OF UROLOGY

Carol Joan Bennett was born into a family of ten in Pittsburgh. Her mother, an early childhood educator in a Montessori school, demonstrated that being both a nurturing parent and having a career outside the home were possible. Indeed, Dr. Bennett's great-grandmother, Ms. Georgia Myrtle Teal, earned a Bachelor's degree from Cornell University and a Master's in Education from Columbia University in the 1920s, a significant feat for a Black woman before the Civil Rights movement. With that heritage, anything was achievable.

As a high school student, Dr. Bennett had envisioned a career as a social worker. To help her gain some experience, Dr. Bennett's dentist arranged for her to volunteer at the Pittsburgh hospital. Daily, she watched in amazement as physicians marched through the office in their long white coats – all tall, all white, all men. Her response, indicative of her gumption, was, "If they can do this and look medical – even presidential – why can't I?" As a college student at Boston University, she survived the rigor of being pre-med by joining a quartet of Black students. In addition to studying together and helping each other navigate the medical school application process, they provided each other community. Although their paths diverged geographically after graduation as they all went on to attend different medical schools, the four college friends continued to support each other, eventually becoming a urologist, internist, psychiatrist and pediatrician. Fifty years later they remain dear friends.

At Georgetown University School of Medicine, Dr. Bennett, initially drawn to renal physiology, envisioned a career in nephrology. She however fell in love with surgery during her clinical clerkships. It was not till she met Dr. Paul Bessette, that she was introduced to urology. Dr. Paul Bessette, a private-practice urologist, allowed her to

be a participant, not simply an observer, in the operating room. There, she took her first swipes during a transurethral resection of prostate, at a time when there was no camera. That level of trust that Dr. Bessette had placed in her made Dr. Bennett confident that this was indeed a career path she could pursue. Dr. Bessette opened up his world to Dr. Bennett, inviting her to dinner at home with his eight kids. It was there – reminded of her own Catholic family with eight vibrant children – that she found belonging. Her journey into urology began.

UROLOGY TRAINING

In 1978, Dr. Bennett graduated from medical school and was recruited by Dr. Jack Lapidus as the first woman to train in urology at the University of Michigan.¹ In that same year, although the proportion of trainees across all specialties who identified as women was 15.4%, women made up only 0.9% of urology residents.² There were few women urology attendings to serve as role models. Dr. Bennett was inspired by Dr. Jean L. Fourcroy, the first woman in urology she ever met. As the fifth woman in the United States to be board certified in Urology, a founding member of the Society of Women in Urology in 1980 and years later, a president of the American Medical Women's Association, Dr. Fourcroy modeled for Dr. Bennett, that as a woman, it was possible to be a urologist-scientist, a leader and a mother.³ During residency, Dr. Bennett was well-supported by the all-male faculty and trainees. She recalls, with clarity, an Attending's admonishment to play an active role in surgery. Although she initially bristled at the brusque words, upon reflection she recognized that encounter as a moment of awakening: operating was not a spectator sport! She vowed to be an active participant not only in surgery but in navigating her career.

Being the first and the only can pose unique challenges but Dr. Bennett gained a mentor in Dr. Edward J. McGuire, a well-renowned neuro-urologist, who became Chief of Urology at University of Michigan in 1983, the year Dr. Bennett completed residency. That year, she began post-residency training with Dr. McGuire in neuro-urology. Under Dr. McGuire's guidance, she went on to develop the spinal cord injury (SCI) fertility program. They partnered with Dr. Stephen Seager, a veterinarian

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From the Department of Urology, David Geffen School of Medicine (DGSOM) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Los Angeles, California; and the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System

Address correspondence to: Efe Chantal Ghanney Simons, M.D., Department of Urology, David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, 10833 Le Conte Avenue, Box 951738, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1738. E-mail: Eghanney@mednet.ucla.edu

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by training, who developed technology enabling electroejaculation. Dr. Bennett spearheaded the translational work in the SCI male population, culminating in the first pregnancy in the United States from a semen sample obtained from a paraplegic man by electroejaculation.⁴

EARLY CAREER & SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS

In 1987, Dr. Carol Bennett became the *first Black woman* to be board-certified by the American Board of Urology (ABU), joining the ranks of trailblazers such as Dr. Richard Francis Jones, the first Black man to be board-certified in urology in 1936, Dr. Elisabeth Pauline Pickett, the first woman to be board-certified in urology in 1962 and Dr. Mary Louise Gannon, the first woman granted membership by the American Urological Association in 1975.^{5–7} Dr. Bennett joined the faculty at the University of Michigan where, fortuitously, both the Veterans Affairs (VA) and Wayne County hospitals were in need of a Chief of Urology, a role she assumed fresh out of training. The experience of being the person-in-command so soon after training was at once exhilarating and terrifying. Teaching trainees kept her on her toes, especially in the county health system, where you truly never know what urologic issues a patient would walk in with!

In 1988, Dr. Carol Bennett's husband, Dr. Keith Black, himself a renowned neurosurgeon, accepted a job at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The surgeon-couple, relocated to California where Dr. Bennett accepted a faculty appointment at the University of Southern California (USC). She was recruited by Dr. Donald Skinner, to be the Chief of Urology at Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center. To say Dr. Bennett was prolific during her time at Rancho would be an understatement. She firmly established herself as an authority in neuro-urology, serving on the board for the National Advisory Board on Medical Rehabilitation Research, the American Spinal Injury Association, and the Institute for Fertility Research and the Sexual Function Health Council of the American Foundation Urologic Disease. She quickly rose up the ranks and became chairperson for the American Spinal Injury Association Urology Committee (1990 –1995) and the Subcommittee on Sexual Dysfunction and Infertility (1991 –1995). From 1988 through 1996, she was (co)-principal investigator for 11 research projects, amounting to \$1,573,723 in grant funding and 42 peer-reviewed publications. Dr. Bennett was widely sought after to share her expertise as a visiting professor and at urologic conferences. By 1996, fewer than 10 years after she had been board-certified, she had presented at 70 national and international conferences. After eight years at USC, she was approached by Dr. Jean deKernion and offered the position of Chief of Urology at the West LA VA, becoming the first woman in urology at UCLA, in 1996.

CHIEF OF UROLOGY AT THE VA HOSPITAL

The West LA VA Hospital Urology clinic that Dr. Bennett arrived to in 1996 was described as a miniscule space, tucked away in the basement, where the 5 clinic rooms opened directly into the patient waiting area, an area that barely permitted sufficient elbow room. With her characteristic tenacity, Dr. Bennett convinced the hospital to agree to the urology clinic co-opting the former ophthalmology clinic, enabling the construction of the present-day expanded modern urology clinic with a separate patient waiting area, 9 exam rooms, 3 private procedure rooms, including capacity for fluoroscopy. With this same zeal to provide the best of care to our nation's veterans, Dr. Bennett has advocated for, and received, 2 full days of blocked operating room time with 2 rooms running simultaneously and a third full surgery day with 1 room running. Additionally, as a neuro-urologist, recognizing the benefits of having access to specialist care, she expanded the repertoire of urologists on staff to include urologists fellowship-trained in not only oncology, endoscopy and andrology but also in female pelvic medicine and reconstructive surgery and in genitourinary reconstructive surgery.

FAMILY LIFE

Dr. Bennett met her husband, Dr. Keith Black, when he, a third-year medical student, was on his general surgery clerkship. She was the intern on service. He also went on to complete his residency training in neurosurgery at the University of Michigan. The 2 young Black surgeons encouraged and supported each other through training and continue to do so till this day. At the time that Dr. Black accepted his faculty position at UCLA, the surgeon-couple was expecting their first child, daughter Teal. For Dr. Bennett, though it was a tough leaving Michigan where she was flourishing, the move to Los Angeles was a family decision.

In Los Angeles, as her illustrious career expanded, so did her young family. In Dr. Bennett's own words, her most important achievement is her children: daughter, Teal and son, Keith. Raising a family did not mean her career had to take a back seat. Her strategy included foregoing all housework to make room for attending the children's weekend sport games, protecting weekends as family time, and intentionally carving out vacation every year with her family, often involving their shared hobby of sailing. Dr. Bennett recounts reading bedtime stories to her children, sometimes rousing them up at night after a long day at work. This bonding time was of such importance to her son in particular, that the ritual continued till he was age 13 and after all seven Harry Potter books had been read out loud! For Dr. Bennett, parenting also meant getting involved at her children's schools. She quickly identified that to have this engagement as a surgeon, she would have to find a high impact-low frequency position at the school (serving as Chair of the Board at two different schools, instead of on the Parent-Teacher Association, from 2005 –2011).



Figure 1. Dr. Carol Bennett performing urodynamics on a neurogenic patient at the Rancho Los Amigos Hospital a few months after she had performed a bladder augmentation with catheterizable stoma.

BUILDING THE UROLOGIC WORKFORCE

Despite the immense amount of administrative responsibility as Chief of Urology at the VA, Dr. Bennett, can always be found in the urology clinic on Mondays and Tuesdays, seeing as many patients as the residents. As a clinician educator, she teaches by example how to provide compassionate competent care and models for trainees how to approach problem solving in and out of the operating room, in a calm, logical, graceful way. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, she sprang into action to fiercely protect her patients, staff and trainees, never once discounting the fears and concerns of the people she served. Lessons such as these are what she has taught her trainees by her skillful leadership and actions.

Dr. Bennett's legacy as a clinician educator is expansive. Since completing residency, she has trained at least 146 urology residents at the University of Michigan, USC and UCLA combined. Several of her trainees have gone on to be noted faculty across the country. Of the 35 urology-trained faculty in the UCLA Department of Urology

in 2021, 14 were under her instruction as residents and 4 as fellows.

As the first woman to assume a faculty position in the UCLA urology department, Dr. Bennett paved the way for many others, allowing for UCLA urology's present-day representation, where 31% of the practicing urologists, and 42% of the residents, are women, despite women only accounting for 9.9% of urologists nationally.⁸ As 9.9% of urologists are women and 2.0% self-identify as Black, there are few opportunities to see a Black woman in leadership in urology. It is worth recognizing that in the four staff appointments that Dr. Carol Bennett has ever held, from the moment she graduated urology residency training, she has served as Chief of Urology. In 2019, in honor of her highly-regarded scholarly work in neuro-urology, outstanding performance as a clinician educator and the impeccable service to our veterans for over 25 years, Dr. Bennett was appointed to the Henry E. Singleton Endowed Chair in Urology at UCLA. Her accomplishments while certainly inspiring to all, for the 57 other Black women urologists across the country, who trained after her, Dr. Bennett's success is an indication of their own potential triumphs.⁹

Dr. Carol Bennett embodies the ultimate triumvirate of academic medicine: clinician-educator, researcher and leader-administrator.¹⁰ In reflecting on her accomplishments, she notes that she often did not have a sense of the ripple effects of her actions. The seemingly isolated choices she made along the way, led her to this place. She credits her mentors, particularly Dr. McGuire, for guiding and sponsoring her in such a way that instead of flailing, she soared. According to Dr. Bennett, "mentors make the impossible seem possible. Once you see the possibilities, you can then make them a reality." With that in mind, she urges all urologists to play an active role in the lives of their trainees. Almost 40 years after she completed residency, although much has changed for women in the urology workforce, access to medicine in general but urology in particular, has remained limited for those historically under-represented in medicine. She recalls being able to count all the Black trainees and faculty at the University of Michigan on two hands, including her husband

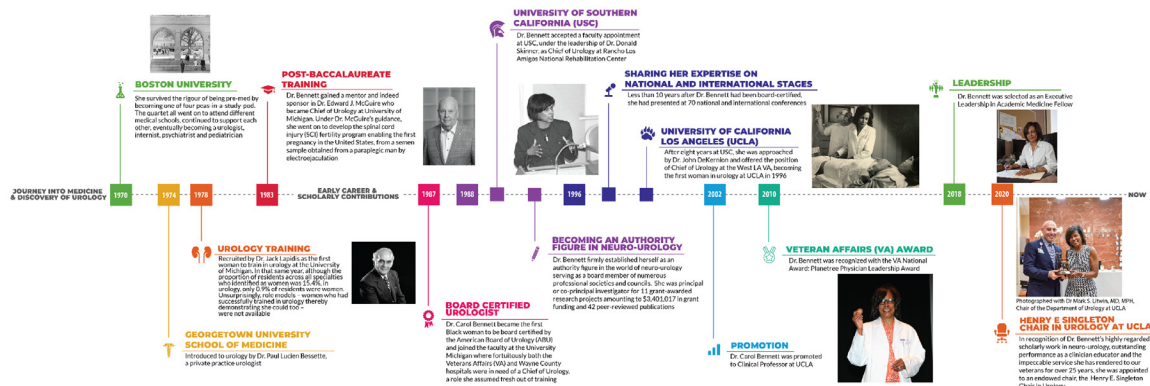


Figure 2. Timeline illustrating milestones in Dr. Carol Bennett's life. (Color version available online.)

and herself. With such low representation, the voices and concerns of those without a seat at the table in medicine, may be ignored. Oftentimes, it is only after establishing oneself as an expert or authority figure that one who identifies as under-represented is truly seen and heard. In this day and age, it is imperative that all disciplines in medicine promote diversity of experience and of people across the board: from trainees and faculty to staff. Dr. Bennett calls upon members of this great profession of urology, to consider investing upstream of residency, just as her dentist did when she was in high school, as Dr. Bessette did when she was in medical school and as Dr. McGuire when she was in residency. To the high school, college or medical student contemplating urology or a career in medicine but encumbered by the million and one reasons why they cannot take the next step, she says to them, “Just do it!” The story you get to tell when looking back on your life’s journey will be well worth the step taken (Fig. 1 , 2).

“Urology has been a journey but what an extraordinary ride it has been!”

-Dr. Carol J. Bennett (April 1st, 2021)

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