

## History of cancer helps him heal others

Oncologist grasps what patients feel

By JEAN P. FISHER, Staff Writer

Cancer can transform a person. As a medical oncologist, Dr. William Berry has seen it more times than he can count.

But when Berry was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2001, the experience left him the same, only more so.

A caring doctor became even more empathetic. A professional pursuit -- even before his diagnosis, prostate cancer was Berry's primary clinical interest -- turned into a mission.

Berry, now 57 and cancer-free, even says his diagnosis has "been a blessing in the long run."

"It means a great deal to patients with prostate cancer who come to see me that I have had it," says Berry, whose low, soft voice coaxes listeners to lean in to hear him. "I like patients to know that. If they don't know when they come in, I tell them."

"I know what it's like," he says. "I know what the decision-making process is like. I see a lot of patients who are newly diagnosed just for that reason. They have some confidence that I'm going to give them some of the experience that I've had."

Prostate cancer patients now make up about 60 percent of Berry's caseload. Eventually he hopes to focus exclusively on patients with the disease. He is medical adviser to Man to Man, a Triangle support group for prostate cancer patients, and he has made it widely known that he is available to speak to newly diagnosed patients about prostate cancer, even if they do not choose to become his patients.

Going through a personal crisis also motivated Berry to reach out to others dealing with personal issues. Through his church, Hayes Barton United Methodist on Fairview Road in Raleigh, Berry completed 50 hours of training to become a Stephen Minister, a lay minister available to parishioners for support and as a confidential listener.

### A man of few words

Putting himself forward doesn't come naturally to Berry, whom friends describe as a quintessential man of few words.

"He's never effusive and he's not chatty -- he's the most even person you'll meet," says Dr. Elizabeth Campbell, a partner in the Raleigh medical practice Berry established in 1979. The two shared an office for years.

"It can be disconcerting at first for people," Campbell says. "They don't know how to take him."



Staff Photo by Pailin Wedel

Dr. William Berry says his bout with prostate cancer was a long-term blessing.

Staff members who see him every day at the medical practice, Cancer Centers of North Carolina, sometimes mistake the tall, gray-haired doctor's taciturn manner for ill temper.

"I've had people ask me, 'Is Dr. Berry mad at me?' " Campbell says. "He's just reserved."

Even Berry's favorite quotation is just three words long: "Life is hard." That's something Dr. Eugene Stead, chief of the department of medicine at Duke University Hospital during Berry's time as an internal medicine resident there, often said.

Some friends say Berry's brevity and calm manner are assets in his line of work. He is, after all, a man who often must break bad news to patients.

"Bill will shoot it to you straight and do it with compassion," says Susan Rouse, who went to Broughton High School with Berry.

Both Berry and Rouse are longtime supporters of Hospice of Wake County, a nonprofit that provides end-of-life care to cancer patients. Berry is a former board member and was the agency's medical director for more than a decade. Rouse is now on the board.

Patients can vouch for Berry's ability to cut to the chase, kindly.

When Lee Moose was diagnosed with prostate cancer in October 2002 at the age of 52, he and his wife did some research and soon learned about the Raleigh oncologist who'd had the disease. During their first visit with Berry, Moose's wife asked, point-blank, how long her husband had to live if they chose to do nothing.

"I'll never forget it -- he looked her right in the eye and said, 'Five years,' " Moose recalls.

Berry also told Moose -- an active man whose passion is officiating high school football, basketball and baseball games -- that he was much too young to do nothing, and recommended an aggressive course of treatment. Moose had chemotherapy and two types of radiation therapy and is now cancer-free.

"What impressed me was when he talked to me, he used the pronoun 'we,' " Moose says. "He said, 'We can beat this thing. We've got a fighting chance.' I had someone with me in this. It calmed me down."

### **An agonizing choice**

Berry rededicated himself to clinical research that may establish new lines of treatment for prostate cancer and spread greater understanding of the disease.

When Berry became a cancer patient, the need for such work became glaringly obvious.

Doctors still understand little about what treatments work best, when to use them and for what patients -- the main reason Berry had focused on prostate cancer even before his diagnosis. Imaging technology can't reliably show how far a patient's cancer has progressed.

Berry, who at the time of his diagnosis had been caring for cancer patients for more than 20 years, struggled to make an educated decision about his own treatment. His wife, Julia, says watching him go through it was "heart-wrenching."

"I realized how frustrating it must be for other patients to go through that, not having enough information really to make the right decision about your treatment," says Berry, who opted to have his prostate gland removed. "You just have to make a decision and hope it's right."

Now, his primary research interest is in developing treatments to prevent the recurrence of prostate cancer (currently, only patients with active disease are treated). Preventive therapies are available for breast and colon cancer patients.

Prostate patients, who remain at risk of a recurrence for up to 15 years after initial treatment, must simply wait and hope their cancer doesn't come back.

As a prostate cancer survivor, Berry knows what that's like all too well.

### **WILLIAM ROSSER BERRY, M.D.**

BORN: Winston-Salem, Aug. 14, 1948

FAMILY: married to Julia Diane Ball Berry. Children (from a previous marriage) are Erin Berry Anderson of Chapel Hill; Rachel Anne Berry, a sophomore at Davidson College; and James Rosser Berry, 16. Two stepchildren, Michael Elliott Pratt, 16, and Emily Elizabeth Pratt, 10. Mother, Anne Wood Kelley, lives in Raleigh. A brother, Paul Thomas Berry, lives in Rolesville, and a sister, Lou Kelley Brewer, lives in Fort Worth, Texas.

EDUCATION: Needham Broughton High School, 1966; pre-med major at Davidson College, B.S., 1970; medical degree, Duke University, 1974; internship and residency in internal medicine at Duke, 1974-76; fellowship in hematology/oncology at Duke, 1976-79.

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION: Hayes Barton United Methodist Church.

CAREER: Started Raleigh Hematology Oncology Clinic July 1, 1979, as a solo practitioner; today the practice does business as Cancer Centers of North Carolina and is the largest cancer practice in the state with 12 medical oncologists and one radiation oncologist.

MOST ADMIRER HISTORICAL FIGURE: Abraham Lincoln, because he persisted in what he knew was the best course for the country and all its citizens despite the severe adverse short-term consequences for him and for the country.

FAVORITE READING: Anything about Jungian psychology; books on prehistorical societies; and modern novelists such as Sue Monk Kidd.

PASTIMES: Gardening, especially perennials and vegetables. The Berrys bought a 53-foot Hatteras yacht about 18 months ago and enjoy cruising the Intracoastal Waterway, taking trips as a family to Bald Head Island or Charleston, S.C. Berry also golfs, and recently talked his wife into learning so she can play with him.