

The Advocate

Nedra Joyner, M.D., '82, asserts herself as a leader among African-American physicians

Mt. Sinai Hospital in Chicago is a very busy place. No parking spaces remain in the four-tiered parking ramp. People dart in and out of the bustling lobby of the hospital, a hospital busier than any you'll find in central or southern Illinois. Tucked within the hospital is the clinic of Nedra Joyner, M.D., director of otolaryngology, head and neck reconstructive surgery at Sinai Medical Group, a practice she shares with two other physicians.

Energetic children and bored adolescents along with a sprinkling of adults fill her clinic waiting room with activity. One by one, the patients swiftly move from the waiting room to the patient rooms and are soon walking out the door.

At the end of the day, a tall physician with beautiful white hair encircling her face enters the waiting room and smiles. It's Dr. Joyner.

"I always wanted to be a doctor. I loved science," she says during a talk in one of her exam rooms. She received a degree in biology from Boston College, where she was the only minority student in the program and support was hard to come by.

Today, as a surgeon, otolaryngologist, and aller-

gist, Dr. Joyner reaches out as an advocate for all minority physicians and patients, not just in the operating room and clinic, but as chair of the Board of Trustees of the National Medical Association (NMA). The NMA represents more than 30,000 African-American physicians and their patients. It was established in 1895, making it the oldest and largest organization representing African-American physicians and health professionals in the nation.

Becoming chair of the board was a natural progression for Dr. Joyner, who has been part of the board for six years, representing six states in the Midwest region. "We want to undertake several initiatives," she says. "I'm well versed in the politics of the medical association, medical education, minority communities and physicians that we serve. As chair of the board, I feel I can be effective in policymaking."

Policymaking means frequent trips to Washington, D.C., to meet with executives and federal legislators to promote the NMA's objectives that include access to care, cultural competency, pipeline supply of minority professionals, and payment problems — issues that are familiar to physicians working in rural and underserved areas.

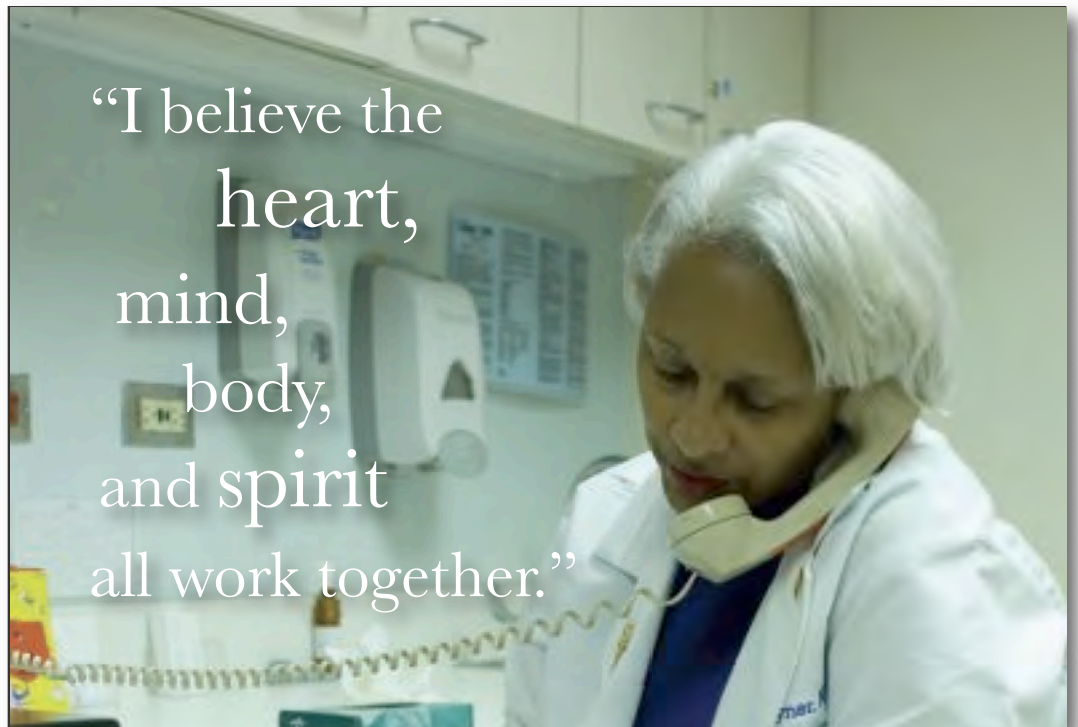
Written by Karen Carlson • Photography by James Hawker



While public transportation makes it easier for patients in urban areas to get access to the doctor, Dr. Joyner says a lot of minority patients just don't go. "A lot of people don't know how to get into the system to take care of their medical problems." She adds, "People in minority communities often ignore their symptoms and are diagnosed in later stages of disease." She recalls a Chicago study that found a majority of minority women who came in for breast cancer treatment were diagnosed in stage 3 or 4, the later stages of the disease. By contrast, she notes, "In a non-minority community, people come in early and are diagnosed early."

age. The NMA's forthcoming case vignettes depict problems from the patient's viewpoint, so physicians know how to address these issues. "Everyone needs to be sensitive to these issues," Dr. Joyner says. "We're developing training that hopefully would be a requirement for physicians' continuing medical education." The Discovery Health Channel is collaborating with the NMA on a television program and online Continuing Medical Education programs for physicians and allied health staff.

Payment problems — a major health care issue



Fear also confines these patients. "There are phobias in the community that might keep people from coming in to be diagnosed," Dr. Joyner says. "For example, they know that with chemotherapy they might lose their hair — that's still heavily portrayed in the community." And some simply don't want to know that something might be wrong. Working with the NMA, she promotes educational awareness of the process and progress of medical treatments.

Dr. Joyner also works with organizations such as the American Public Health Association, AARP, and the American Cancer Society on cultural competency issues. Together, they are developing outreach programs to help physicians inform the community about issues such as race, gender and

nationwide — don't escape the minority communities. "A vast number of people in the country are working but don't have insurance," Dr. Joyner says. "They can't get into a regular physicians' office unless they're paying out of pocket. For some, the emergency room is their primary contact with physicians."

In the next decade, Dr. Joyner says, fewer physicians of color will be trained to work in underserved communities. So her primary initiative this year will put a pipeline in place to get minority youths interested in health sciences and help them on the path to becoming physicians. "We're talking about getting high school and middle school students the correct education so they can move into a college program that will get them to medical school, and eventually, back to the commu-

nity.” She also mentors nascent physicians, helping them get their start and finding programs so they can manage their educational debt.

A native of the Chicago community, Dr. Joyner has worked at Mt. Sinai Hospital almost since the day she graduated from her residency in otolaryngology at SIU School of Medicine in Springfield.

She found her calling in surgery and otolaryngology after her first experience in surgery as a third-year medical student at SIU School of Medicine: She removed a tonsil on her own. “That was a thrill! I was so excited. I called my mom first thing.” She also graduated from the MEDPREP program in Carbondale, where she appreciated the support from the faculty.

From simple allergies to severe traumas, Dr. Joyner sees a range of patients at Mt. Sinai, an urban hospital with one of the only Level One trauma centers in the city. As a surgeon, Dr. Joyner sees a lot of trauma patients, including stabbings, blunt force trauma, and gunshot victims. “I do a lot of facial reconstruction,” she says. “I like that part of my practice — I think that’s my forte.”

She estimates that half her patients are Hispanic and 40 percent are African-American. “My practice keeps me humble,” she says. “These people are poor and are grateful for whatever you do for them.” She believes in being open and honest with her patients, but she gets frustrated at those who don’t follow her instructions. “I believe the heart, mind, body, and spirit all work together, but you have to do the physical things as well.”

A fast mover, Dr. Joyner performs surgeries 2½ days a week and loves the immediate results of the operating room. “Surgery requires dexterity, creativity and imagination,” she says. “Sometimes, you have to put together several procedures to make it work for that particular person. It’s fun to think about how to do it.” She recalls one young man who had a gunshot wound to the neck and had bilateral vocal cord paralysis. Dr. Joyner inserted a tracheotomy but later the man wanted it removed. “We did a procedure to lateralize one of his vocal cords so he would have a better airway and then decanulated him from his tracheotomy tube. He’s now going to school without the tube and going to get married soon. Another save!”

She also has a clinical appointment at the University of Chicago, where she enjoys training residents and brings them to her Mt. Sinai practice to



Dr. Joyner reviews a chart with medical assistant Alicia Ascensio.

see her patients. Residents, she says, also need to know that each surgery differs. “They say you can teach anybody to operate, but you have to use your mind and creativity in order to make it work.”

Dr. Joyner’s life is a whirlwind from the clinic to the operating room to traveling for the NMA, and she still makes time to visit her two adult daughters, Ariel Triplett, who just graduated from Howard University, and Blair Triplett, who studies business and economics at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. In her free time, Dr. Joyner enjoys bicycling, walking, golf, cooking jambalaya, and baking one of her specialties: pound cake or sweet potato pie.

Her work with the NMA includes spreading knowledge throughout the world. Last November, she was a representative of the NMA during a visit to Ghana. The Ghana College of Physicians and Surgeons invited the NMA to their 50th anniversary celebration and opening of a new medical facility. The two entities are creating a visiting professorship for U.S. primary care physicians to update the local physicians in Ghana about primary care knowledge.

As her year as chair progresses, she finds herself as busy as Mt. Sinai Hospital, organizing colloquiums, board meetings and the annual meeting in July in Atlanta which will close out her “reign” as chair of the NMA Board of Trustees. With just one year as chair to work on her multiple goals, “We are moving fast,” Dr. Joyner says. But you never know; sometime in the future, you may find Dr. Joyner as president of the National Medical Association. ●●●