



Dr. Mokenge Malafa instructs fourth-year resident Lori Rolando in a radiofrequency ablation simulation.

On the Ball

Dr. Mokenge Malafa scores goals playing soccer, researching, educating and doctoring.

He might have been known as “Rev. Malafa” instead of “Dr. Malafa.” Growing up in the West African country of Nigeria, young Mokenge Malafa seriously considered entering the priesthood. In high school, Mokenge befriended a nun who took him to hospitals with her to administer spiritual care, where his eyes opened instead to the thrill of caring for the physical body.

Years later in the United States, as a clinician, surgeon, educator, scientist and clinical researcher, Mokenge Malafa, M.D., is a physician who does everything — and loves it.

“I can’t imagine not doing any one of these things,” he says of his multiple roles. “They all influence each other, and that’s how I function.” In 1994, Dr. Malafa was recruited by SIU to help expand the School of Medicine’s surgical oncology department. He now is an associate professor in the School’s Department of Surgery.

In addition to his many professional endeavors, Dr. Malafa, known as “Mo” to his friends, started a soccer team at SIU soon after he arrived at the School of Medicine and has received great response. The 20-player team consists of medical students, physicians, medical staff and several others from the health-care field. “We play every week,” says coach Malafa, who lists several outdoor and indoor locations in Springfield where the SIU team plays against teams in a newly established adult league.

Dr. Malafa touts not just the physical benefits of playing soccer, but the opportunity for personal growth within the SIU team. “It’s an opportunity for everyone to bring their families, to relax and get to know each other informally,” he says. Dr. Malafa’s own family gets in on the game: his sons, Mayo, 17, and Van, 13, enjoy playing alongside their dad. Cheering them on are Tracy, Dr. Malafa’s wife of 20 years, and their daughters Nalowa, 15, and Emily, 11. And thanks to the soccer team, Dr. Malafa says he has developed close friendships with some of his students. “We can relate to each other in a different way,” he says.

This interaction translates to a better dynamic in the classroom, where Dr. Malafa, the educator, enjoys passing on knowledge to the enthusiastic audience. “Students ask the best questions,” notes the professor. “They’re not staid, and they still have all the ideals



Dr. Malafa and son, Van.

that we continue to reinforce. Their vigor and enthusiasm keeps me young!” Dr. Malafa has received numerous awards for his skills as an educator, including two *Excellence in Resident Teaching* awards and six consecutive *Excellence in Student Teaching* awards, all from the SIU Department of Surgery. In 2000, he also received the *Humanism in Medicine* award from The Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey. The students’ fresh perspectives are a continuous reminder, he says, of the basic pleasure of being a physician. “They are focused on the fact that we should be humbled and in awe of other human beings who entrust us with their lives.”

Dr. Malafa takes this trust very seriously, and his kind heart and compassionate nature make him accessible as a physician. Accompanying his warm bedside manner is a strong, focused mind unafraid to tackle one of the most challenging divisions of medicine: oncology. His surgical training allows him to deal with most solid tumors in the body, including breast, melanoma, colorectal, liver, pancre-

atic, and head and neck tumors. As a surgeon, it’s not unusual for him to perform up to 10 operations in just one week. He currently serves as president of the Sangamon/Menard Unit of the American Cancer Society.

It takes a special kind of person to choose to face the challenges of cancer as a profession, but Dr. Malafa takes an optimistic perspective. “As a student and resident, it was clear to me that the most exciting progress in medicine was being made in the field of cancer.” While he acknowledges the advances made, he excitedly stresses that medicine has enormous potential to make even bigger strides.

“Cancer research and treatment are going through very dynamic phases right now,” says the surgeon. “Years ago, the attitude toward cancer was nihilistic — the dreaded ‘C’. Now, cancer is no longer a death sentence. There are methods to prevent cancer, diagnose it earlier and improved treatments.”

Dr. Malafa takes an active role in pursuing better cancer treatments through his numerous research projects. “Research is the place to dream, to wonder, to ask questions and reinforce my roles as a clinician and educator,” he says. “I consider it essential to distinguish myself as an academic surgeon as opposed to a clinician in private practice.”

His research includes the study of angiogenesis, which occurs when tumors grow by forming their own blood vessels. “If we could choke off their blood supply, the tumors couldn’t grow and spread.” One molecule he has found to be important in the process is called vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF). The endothelial cells form the walls of blood vessels and help create new blood vessels as the body needs them. VEGF activates the growth of endothelial cells. Cancer cells express VEGF, calling on the endothelial cells to form new blood vessels, which allows the

tumor to survive and grow. “We are studying the question of how tumor cells produce this molecule, and how we can turn it off.”

As part of his clinical research, Dr. Malafa, working with Gary Dunnington, M.D., professor and chair of SIU’s Department of Surgery, has studied sentinel lymph node biopsies for patients with breast cancer, a minimally-invasive procedure that can determine whether cancerous cells have spread beyond their primary locations. The lymph nodes, small, bean-shaped glands located throughout the lymphatic system, are the first location that will be affected if the cancer has spread. If the lymph nodes are infected, chances are that the cancer has spread to another part of the body. The sentinel lymph node would be the first to show signs of cancer.

“It’s an extremely promising method,” says Dr. Malafa. In the procedure for breast cancer, instead of removing all of the lymph nodes, surgeons only remove one or two, including the sentinel node.

Dr. Malafa tested 70 breast cancer patients who underwent sentinel lymph node biopsies, and the results were outstanding. “Our ability to find the sentinel lymph node was over 90 percent accurate,” says Dr. Malafa.

“And we found that the sentinel lymph node was 100 percent accurate in detecting whether cancer was present.” The procedure allows a less invasive option for women with breast cancer.

Dr. Malafa also studies vitamin E succinate for use with breast cancer patients, which has been shown to thwart tumor growth. He is studying the most effective way to administer vitamin E succinate to cancer patients.

Another innovative technique Dr. Malafa is investigating is radiofrequency ablation to treat cancer tumors. Radiofrequency is a mini-

mally invasive, image-guided therapy that uses a probe to directly target tumors. The probe, a needle-electrode, is inserted directly into the tumor, and then radiofrequency energy, like a microwave, effectively “burns” the tumor and kills the cancer cells, which become harmless scar tissue.

A relatively new treatment modality, radiofrequency could provide hope for liver tumors. “In many patients,” says Dr. Malafa, “the liver is the site where patients begin to fail. This new technique offers more treatments with less morbidity to the patient than the traditional treatment of removing parts of the liver.” He is developing clinical research using radiofrequency thermal ablation to treat liver cancers.

Dr. Malafa hopes to incorporate all his efforts into the SIU Cancer Institute. “I hope my current roles as a practicing oncologist, educator and researcher will serve the cancer center well.” Already, he has moved his clinic into interim space allocated for the Institute in Springfield’s Baylis Building.

With such a busy schedule, Dr. Malafa’s secret to achieving excellence in all his roles is balance. “I’m learning better as time goes on that planning, being focused and having realistic goals is an excellent way to keep balance and recognize that advances are made in small increments.”

He understands that it’s these little



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things that make a difference, whether it is spending a few hours kicking a soccer ball around with students or focusing on specific cancer therapies. “You have to look into yourself and pursue what you really enjoy doing and not be caught up by other issues. Ultimately, you will be much more productive and happier doing what you enjoy doing.”

This multi-talented physician is a happy and productive oncologist, surgeon, educator and researcher. Busy, to be sure, but Dr. Malafa wouldn’t have it any other way. “If I was not doing any one of these things,” he says with a grin, “I think I would be pretty bored.” ■