



# LIFE AFTER PROSTATE CANCER

RELIABLE RESEARCH AND SOUND SUPPORT ARE KEY.

BY PENNY DICKERSON

When Cornelius Cobb\* was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2010, the 63-year-old graduate of the University of Chicago said he freaked out. He was both scared and anxious about potential future treatment plans and side effects related to each option.

Cobb was a resident of Raleigh, N.C., and attended his scheduled Prostate-Specific Antigen (PSA exam) appointment at Duke University Medical Center. The test measures levels of PSA produced by normal and malignant cells of the prostate gland. An analysis of Cobb's returned blood work was the initial cancer alarm; a biopsy confirmed prostate malignancy.

"My diagnosis was the first time I ever thought of my mortality," said Cobb. "My prognosis was good because it was stage I, and the options I were given included surgery, radiation, or surveillance, which meant that we'd just sit and watch for changes."

Cobb had an advantage rare to some Black men. His mother was a registered nurse, his sister a pharmacist, and he was a master's degree-educated professional who held numerous human resources positions for universities on both coasts. Further, Cobb maintained private health insurance

and knew how to navigate complexities often associated with healthcare systems.

"I measured each choice and immediately ruled out surgery due to potential side effects like erectile dysfunction," Cobb said. "Surgery also would have you at risk of incontinence, and who wants to wear a diaper for the rest of your life?"

Ultimately, Cobb chose noninvasive radiation therapy. He said doctors informed him that the recommended radiation course for Stage I prostate cancer was a nine-week succession for five days per week. However, through participation in a clinical trial, Cobb's treatment was shortened by an increase in radiation dose that required just five treatments over three months.

## FOCUSING ON THE PROBLEM

September is dedicated to prostate cancer awareness and represents a time to help people learn about the disease and those affected. Healthcare disparities among Black men are monumental but none as profoundly

represented by the prevalence of prostate cancer. From accessing early screenings to the affordability of advanced treatment innovations — a full-bodied gap exists that differentiates prostate cancer health services between men of color and white counterparts.

An American Cancer Society literature review titled: Racial Disparities in Black Men with Prostate Cancer, states Black men are disproportionately affected by prostate cancer with earlier presentation, more aggressive disease, and higher mortality rates versus white men.

Further, Black men have less access to treatment and experience longer delays between diagnosis and treatment. Less access to clinical trial participation among Black men with prostate cancer was noted along with racial disparities and institutional racism. Cultural factors include generalized mistrust of the health care system, poor physician-patient communication, lack of information and treatment options, fear of prostate cancer diagnosis, and perceived societal stigma of the disease.

## PROVIDING ANSWERS

ZERO Prostate Cancer is a leading national nonprofit with the mission to end prostate cancer and help all who are impacted. It advances research, provides support, and creates solutions to achieve health equity to meet the most critical needs of our communities.

Based in Alexandria, Va., the organization's goal is to create Generation ZERO — the first generation free from prostate cancer. ZERO is an award-winning organization committed to achieving health equity so that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to prevent, find, treat, and survive prostate cancer, regardless of race, the financial resources one has or has access to, or where one lives.

A recent podcast episode centered around health equity and ZERO's Black Men's Prostate Cancer Initiative Support Groups, included hosts Dr. Reggie Tucker-Seeley, ZERO's vice president of health equity, and Kris Bennett, ZERO's director of health equity, community organizing and engagement.

"...I think when we generally hear the term "health equity," it can mean

a lot of different things to a lot of different people. Just as an example, if I were to say "stand against racism" or "stop racism," I think most folks would know or have a general idea of what that meant in an interpersonal way, and so I think it's really important that we continue to define what health equity means, and I think that's why I've loved what we've done here at ZERO..." said Bennett.

Bennett shared that health equity means everyone has a fair and just opportunity to prevent, find, treat, and survive prostate cancer. ZERO is committed to finding ways to eliminate prostate cancer for anybody with a prostate; but in order to achieve their mission to end prostate cancer, the organization must first zero out racial disparities by eliminating the gap between Black folks, racial groups and prostate cancer.

## ACCEPTING SUPPORT

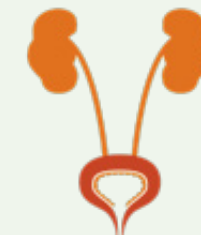
Cobb is now a 77-year-old retiree who relocated to Jacksonville, Fla., in 2017. During his treatments, he and his wife were separated which left him without a strong support system. They have since divorced.

Cobb's local urologist introduced him to ZERO's Black Men's Prostate Cancer Initiative Virtual Support Group that is facilitated by social workers. The group meets via ZOOM bi-monthly for nearly two hours and invites patients to share unfiltered concerns. Cobb said he has been a participant since March 2023 but does not attend every meeting.

"Through all of this process, I thought the health care professionals were treating the cancer but not the person," said Cobb. "I felt there was a lack of services to provide emotional support. No matter how many people you talk to, no one understands unless they walk in your shoes."

*"The patient mentioned in this feature article requested that his real name not be used."*

*Penny Dickerson is an innovation and entrepreneur reporter for the Jacksonville Business Journal. Reporting for this story in ONYX Magazine was made possible by a health equity fellowship sponsored by The Commonwealth Fund and the Association of Health Care Journalists.*



**95% OF ALL PROSTATE CANCERS ARE DETECTED WHEN THE CANCER IS CONFINED TO THE PROSTATE**

Treatment success rates are high compared with most other types of cancer in the body.

**THE 5-YEAR SURVIVAL RATE IN THE UNITED STATES FOR MEN DIAGNOSED WITH PROSTATE CANCER IS 99%**

However, prostate cancer comes in many forms and some men can have aggressive prostate cancer even when it appears to be confined to the prostate

