

4-8-1999

## Washington University Record, April 8, 1999

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### Recommended Citation

"Washington University Record, April 8, 1999" (1999). *Washington University Record*. Book 826.  
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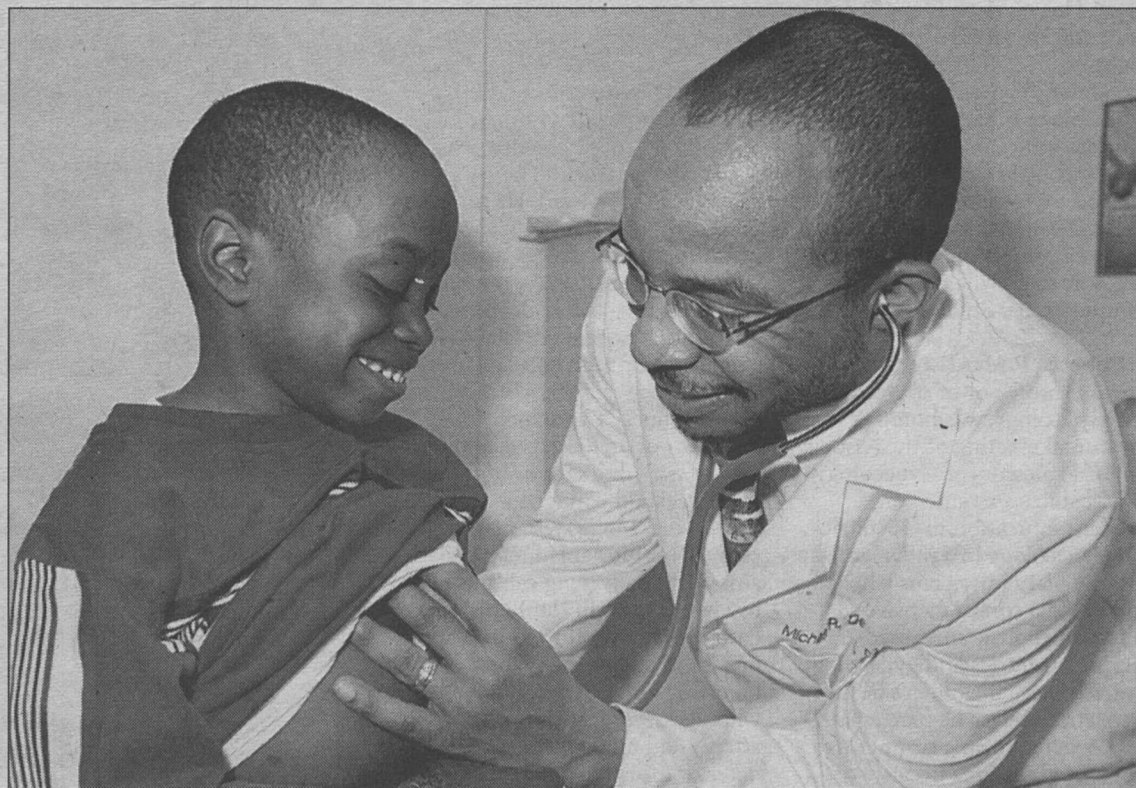








## Washington People



Michael R. DeBaun, M.D., gives Isaac Cornell, 5, a routine checkup. Isaac, who has sickle cell disease, suffered a stroke at 18 months.

# Man with many missions

Michael R. DeBaun, M.D., lets little stand in his way as he researches sickle cell disease and other threats to children

BY DIANE DUKE WILLIAMS

**M**ichael R. DeBaun, M.D., assistant professor of pediatrics, has many missions. And when he decides to accomplish something, he lets very little stand in his way.

"He's like the Energizer bunny," said Martha Nelson, a pediatric nurse practitioner who works with DeBaun. "He's charged up all the time. His favorite saying is, 'Let's just do it.'"

Colleagues describe DeBaun as hardworking, determined, dynamic and inquisitive. They say these qualities, combined with his expertise, have led to his many successes — igniting the clinical research program in pediatric hematology/oncology, building a program for children with sickle cell disease and successfully directing the BJC Pediatric Hospice Program.

"He has expertise in epidemiology and clinical trial design, and he is extremely aggressive in the way he approaches studies," said David B. Wilson, M.D., Ph.D., associate professor of pediatrics and director of the Division of Pediatric Hematology/Oncology. "He quickly sets up studies, analyzes the data and writes up the rewrites, and I think that's his greatest strength. He's a real workhorse, and that's important in this field."

Wilson added that DeBaun and some of his colleagues in hematology/oncology have been out in front on clinical research projects nationally instead of following other universities, as in years past.

### Terrific mentor

Elizabeth Baorto, M.D., a clinical fellow in infectious diseases who is working on a project with DeBaun, said he got her interested in clinical research. "He has terrific mentoring skills, and he can get you excited about anything. He sees excitement in what most people look at as ordinary."

DeBaun's clinical research focuses on strokes in children with sickle cell disease and on cancer predisposition syndromes in children.

Sickle cell disease is an inherited blood disorder that affects about one in 375 African-American infants. Children with sickle cell are more prone than healthy children to have strokes. About a fifth of them have a stroke

before they are 12 years old, and two-thirds will have a silent stroke, which often goes unrecognized because the child acts normally. The telltale sign, however, is falling behind with schoolwork.

DeBaun is trying to understand how best to identify children who have had silent strokes, the risk factors for strokes and the best way to help these children catch up at school.

"We've had preliminary data to strongly suggest that children with silent strokes can receive educational rehabilitation specific for the type of lesions the stroke caused, and it's exciting," DeBaun said. Historically, sickle cell disease hasn't gotten as much publicity and funding as other

board of the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America.

In another area of his research, DeBaun studies Beckwith Wiedemann syndrome (BWS), a rare congenital disorder affecting 350 newborns a year in the United States. Children with BWS often have a number of clinical features, some of which include large size at birth, a large tongue and large kidneys.

Most importantly, children with BWS are at increased risk for cancer. In 1993, while at the National Cancer Institute (NCI), DeBaun established an international registry for BWS, and he is currently studying the syndrome's genetic epidemiology, as well as several other childhood cancer predisposition syndromes.

"This is a fascinating area of investigation," he said, "because we are combining two areas of investigation, classic epidemiol-

### Michael R. DeBaun, M.D.

From St. Louis, Mo.

**Education** B.S., Howard University; M.S., Stanford University; M.D., Stanford University Medical School; house staff, Washington University School of Medicine; M.P.H., The Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health

**Positions** assistant professor of pediatrics and medical director of BJC Pediatric Hospice Program

**Family** Wife, Sandra; children, Rachel, 13; Malcolm, 11; and Morgan, 9

"He is a deeply committed physician — one who cares about people and strives to better their circumstances."

ALAN L. SCHWARTZ

diseases. But DeBaun recently has seen some major changes in this area.

In 1998, the state of Missouri awarded DeBaun funds to expand the care for children with sickle cell disease, enabling the Department of Pediatrics to establish a multidisciplinary treatment program for sickle cell patients, from newborn screening to early adulthood.

Also, St. Louis Children's Hospital recently approved an initiative to make sickle cell disease a fundraising priority, about which DeBaun is very excited.

"This initiative represents a commitment of the leadership of St. Louis Children's Hospital and the Department of Pediatrics, demonstrating that sickle cell disease is an important entity and that care for these children will be second to none," said DeBaun, who recently was elected to the

ogy and molecular biology, for a better understanding of cancer in these unique groups of children."

DeBaun grew up in University City, the son of a McDonnell Douglas employee and an elementary school teacher at Montessori Euclid School. His aunt and uncle, also educators, lived down the street, and his grandparents were less than 20 minutes away.

"We were urban Waltons. Formally, it was an extended family, but informally, it was one big family," DeBaun said.

DeBaun's close-knit family gave him a strong sense of self and a rock-solid foundation. He also believes his enthusiasm for life began at home.

DeBaun attended St. Louis University High School, where he learned an outstanding code of discipline. He chose Howard University for college, which he

describes as four years of utopia. "It was a very nurturing environment," DeBaun said. "Professors were extremely interested in making sure you mastered the information. It provided a strong foundation for my professional education."

In deciding to become a physician, DeBaun was heavily influenced by his pediatrician, Helen Nash, M.D., a well-known St. Louis pediatrician who cared for his family. "She was the only powerful figure that I knew," DeBaun said. "I always admired her. She's at the vanguard for children's health issues in St. Louis."

He attended medical school at Stanford University and returned to St. Louis in 1987 for a pediatric residency, chief residency and fellowship in pediatric hematology/oncology at the School of Medicine. During his fellowship, he began studying stroke in children with sickle cell disease.

He then decided to pursue a master's in public health from the Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health, receiving the degree in 1993. He also conducted three years of research at the NCI.

Margaret Tucker, M.D., DeBaun's mentor at the NCI and chief of the genetic epidemiology branch there, said DeBaun is a rising star in genetic epidemiology. "He's an unusual mix of clinician and epidemiologist, which makes him especially qualified to conduct interdisciplinary studies. He does these studies very well," she said, adding that his patients also adore him.

DeBaun was recruited to the School of Medicine in 1996 as an assistant professor of pediatrics after receiving the Robert Wood Johnson Minority Faculty Development Award.

### 'Very talented'

"Michael is a very talented person with a rich heritage," said Alan L. Schwartz, M.D., Ph.D., the Harriet B. Spoehrer Professor and head of the Department of Pediatrics. "His family have been educators in St. Louis for generations. He is a deeply committed physician — one who cares about people and strives to better their circumstances."

DeBaun and his wife, Sandra, have three children, Rachel, 13; Malcolm, 11; and Morgan, 9. Sandra, DeBaun said, is the cornerstone of the family and has made a choice to forego her career as a teacher to balance the family's life.

"On a personal level," DeBaun said, "our life is circled around our children." DeBaun plays soccer with Malcolm and Morgan and takes Rachel to the symphony. He also likes to read biographies.

In 1997, DeBaun became medical director of the BJC Pediatric Hospice Program, a service in which he strongly believes. In this role, he coordinates the care of children who have terminal illnesses. He visits patients at home and helps families come together during these very difficult times.

Wilson sings the praises of DeBaun in this volunteer position. "He's done a very fine job with a very difficult group of patients," he said. "His beeper is always on to take phone calls from the hospice nursing staff. And as you can imagine, there's always a number of very sick kids."

Caring for patients is one of the most satisfying parts of DeBaun's job. "What I like most about patient care are the times of joy," DeBaun said. "It's not just the sad times, it's the good times, too. You're not just taking care of the child — you're caring for the whole family."