

# M. Deborrah Hyde, MD, MS: The Second African-American Female Neurosurgeon

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*Background:* A less-publicized consequence of the civil rights movement in the mid-20th century is the door of opportunity it provided for African-American women to become neurosurgeons, beginning in 1984 with Alexa I. Canady (University of Minnesota). Unfortunately, the exploits of a contemporary African-American woman neurosurgeon, M. Deborrah Hyde, have remained largely in obscurity. This report details the career and exploits of Hyde, one of the first women to receive neurosurgery training in Ohio.

*Methods:* A comprehensive review of pertinent modern and historical records spanning the past century was performed.

*Results:* Born in 1949 in Laurel, MS, Hyde received her BS with honors from Tougaloo College in 1969 and her MS in biology at Cleveland State University. Despite being told in medical school that she was not qualified to compete with "better-prepared" nonminority students, Hyde received her MD from Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine in 1977, earning election into the Alpha Omega Alpha medical honor society. The next year, she began neurosurgery residency at Case Western under Dr. Robert A. Ratcheson and Dr. Robert F. Spetzler, finishing in 1982 as the program's first female graduate. In 1985, Hyde became the second African-American woman certified by the American Board of Neurological Surgery and in 1991 she established the Beacon of Hope Scholarship Foundation for underprivileged youth. She has subsequently continued a distinguished career in private practice, presently residing in West Hills, CA.

*Conclusion:* Hyde's diligence, perseverance and commitment enabled her to overcome intense sexism and racism to train at Case Western, becoming the second African-American woman neurosurgeon and the third woman trained in Ohio (first and second of which were Carole Miller and Janet Bay). As the first woman to train under Ratcheson and Spetzler, her determination, excellence and generosity continue to inspire people of all races.

**Key words:** M. Deborrah Hyde ■ education ■ African Americans ■ neurosurgeon

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## INTRODUCTION

The advances of the civil rights movement in the mid-20th century made it possible for many African Americans to enter the distinguished field of neurosurgery, beginning in 1947 with Clarence S. Greene Sr., MD, DDS, FACS, who trained at the world-renowned Montreal Neurological Institute, becoming the first African-American board-certified neurosurgeon in 1953.<sup>1-4</sup> Less than a decade later, E. Latunde Odeku, MD, FACS became the first African-American neurosurgeon trained in the United States (University of Michigan), and the second African-American certified by the American Board of Neurological Surgery in 1961.<sup>3,5,6</sup>

A less-publicized consequence of the civil rights movement is the door of opportunity it provided for African-American women to become board-certified neurosurgeons, beginning in 1981 with Alexa I. Canady becoming the first woman and first African American to receive neurosurgery training in the state of Minnesota (University of Minnesota) and in 1984 becoming the first African-American woman to receive board certification from the American Board of Neurological Surgery.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the exploits of a contemporary African-American woman neurosurgeon, M. Deborrah Hyde MD, MS, have remained largely in obscurity. This report details the career and exploits of Hyde, one of the first women to receive neurosurgery training in the state of Ohio and the second African-American woman certified by the American Board of Neurological Surgery. Information was gathered from a comprehensive review of pertinent modern and historical records spanning the past century, both in print and in electronic form.

## HISTORICAL VIGNETTE

Hyde (Figure 1) was born on January 18, 1949 in Laurel, MS. During her childhood, she spent a great

deal of time with her grandmother (Annie Bell Huff), mother (Ann Huff McDonald) and stepfather (Amos McDonald), who encouraged her to reach her dreams despite the cultural, racial, socioeconomic and gender-related obstacles she would have to face. Emboldened by the constant affirmation of her mother, stepfather and grandmother, Hyde became the first member of her family to go to college, receiving her bachelor of science with honors in biology from Tougaloo College (Tougaloo, MS) in 1969. Afterwards, she began her interest in the central nervous system by receiving her masters of science in biology at Cleveland State University in 1973, with her graduate thesis (mentored by Dr. Peter Baker) focusing on the development of the maturing rat eye.

Inspired by her master's program to apply to medical school, Hyde was accepted by Case Western Reserve, where she started in 1973. Despite being told by a medical school professor that she was not qualified to compete with "better-prepared" nonminority students, Hyde continued undaunted, receiving her doctor of medicine from Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine (Cleveland, OH) in 1977, while earning election into the prestigious Alpha Omega Alpha medical honor society, awarded to the top 25% of each medical school's graduating class nationwide.<sup>8</sup> During her first medical school clerkship, her interest in the central nervous system became intertwined with a love for the operating room, and her passion for neurosurgery was born. Aided and encouraged by the mentorship of Dr. Harold Rekate (at the time a junior neurosurgery resident at Case Western who is presently the chief of pediatric neurosciences at the Barrow Neurological Institute), she applied for and

received a neurosurgery training position at Case Western, headed by the legendary Dr. Frank Nulson (Hyde, personal communication), who had worked with Dr. Eugene Spitz to create the famous Spitz-Holter valve for treating hydrocephalus.<sup>9</sup>

The next year, Hyde remained in Cleveland to begin neurosurgery residency at Case Western, which included among the faculty two of the most prominent neurosurgeons of the modern era: Robert A. Ratcheson MD, and Robert F. Spetzler, MD, FACS. Ratcheson became the Harvey Huntington Brown Jr. professor and chair of the department of neurological surgery at Case Western Reserve, subsequently becoming president of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons and the American Association of Neurological Surgeons—the two most prominent neurosurgical organizations in North America. Spetzler became the director of the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix, AZ, where (among his many other accomplishments) he developed a heuristic grading scale for cerebral arteriovenous malformations used worldwide by neurosurgeons, neurologists and radiologists,<sup>10</sup> and is widely considered by many physicians to be the best vascular neurosurgeon in the world.

Having earned the honor of being the first woman selected to train under these (and other) prominent neurosurgeons at Case Western, Hyde continued her excellence as a resident, finishing in 1982 as the program's first female and first African-American graduate, and only the third woman to complete neurosurgery training in the state of Ohio (the first and second of which were Carole Miller—Ohio State 1971, and Janet Bay—Cleveland Clinic 1980). Following residency, she practiced at the Guthrie Clinic of the Robert Parker Hospital in Sayre, PA.<sup>8</sup> In September 1985, Hyde became the second African-American woman certified by the American Board of Neurological Surgery, subsequently continuing a distinguished career in private practice.

Not satisfied with her clinical excellence, Hyde has been active in giving back to the African-American community. Inspired by her grandmother's spirit of generosity towards helping others achieve their dreams, Hyde founded the Beacon of Hope Scholarship Foundation in 1991 ([www.beaconhope.org](http://www.beaconhope.org)) to provide underprivileged African-American graduating high-school students of Mississippi and south central Los Angeles with financial assistance for higher education. Among her numerous accolades, Hyde was featured in *Ebony* magazine in 1983; honored by *Esquire* magazine in 1984 as one of "the best of the new generation—those who exemplify in their professional lives the qualities of courage, originality, ingenuity, vision and selfless service;" and honored in 1996 with the Dominion Strong Woman Excellence in Leadership Award, granted to outstanding African-American role models. Hyde currently runs her own neurosurgery private practice in West Hills, CA.

**Figure 1. M. Deborrah Hyde, MD, MS, the second African-American woman board-certified neurosurgeon**



## CONCLUSION

Hyde's perseverance and commitment enabled her to overcome intense sexism and racism to train at Case Western, becoming one of the first women to complete neurosurgery training in the state of Ohio and the second African-American woman to be board certified in neurosurgery. As the first woman to train under the legendary Drs. Ratcheson and Spetzler, her determination, excellence and willingness to give back to her community continue to inspire women and men of all races.

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