

Dr. Michael Cookson

A TWO-TIME OU ALUM AND INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED SURGEON RETURNS HOME TO TRANSFORM PATIENTS' LIVES.

BY CONNIE CRONLEY



Dr. Michael Cookson

OU HEALTH

IF EVER A MAN loved his work, it's Dr. Michael Cookson.

He admires his employer, the University of Oklahoma College of Medicine, both for what it is and for its goals. "It is the state's flagship academic health system," he says, "making tremendous strides

to improve the health care of people from Oklahoma in all walks of life."

He takes pride in his specialty, urologic oncology, for its surgical innovations and the success rates of treatment of prostate, bladder and kidney cancer. "We do surgeries that are curative and quarterback a multidisciplinary care team."

Cookson is a nationally acclaimed surgeon, a pioneer in prostate and bladder cancer treatments and one of the state's few fellowship-trained urologic oncologists. An internationally recognized leader in his field, Cookson is known as a passionate patient advocate. "The long-term relationships with grateful patients—to me, that is most rewarding," he says.

The two-time OU alumnus cared enough to choose Oklahoma over Vanderbilt University in Nashville, where he was vice chair of urology and thriving in a career of teaching and research back in 2013.

And his alma mater loves him right back. Cookson received a 2023 OU Regents' Alumni Award, the university's top alumni honor.

If the OU College of Medicine had an official ambassador to enthusiastically champion its advances in research and program of fellowship-trained cancer urologists, Cookson would be a leading candidate. His professional ardor is well known to peers.

"He's very passionate about his work and about expanding research in urology," says Dr. Ian Dunn, executive dean of the OU College of Medicine. That ardor, backed by university resources, has enabled Cookson to recruit top talent and build a team of specialists in urologic oncology, an expertise much needed in Oklahoma.

The OU Health Stephenson Cancer Center's quest for superiority was the magnet that lured Cookson back to Oklahoma in 2013.

"People were having to leave the state for complex, high-end cancer care. Now they don't," he says. "The people of Oklahoma deserve state-of-the-art treatment and to not be burdened by the hardships of travel and access."

Stephenson Cancer Center is the state's only National Cancer Institute-designated cancer center, he points out. His multiple leadership positions include chief surgical officer for both OU Health and the cancer center, and he holds the Donald D. Albers Chair for OU's Department of Urology.

Those are big titles for a big job, and the scope is enormous; one of every six Oklahomans seeking cancer treatment is cared for at Stephenson.

OU Health is a comprehensive academic healthcare system providing precision medicine,



Dr. Michael Cookson with OU Health Department of Urology colleagues Dr. Brian Cross, left, and Dr. Sanjay Patel.

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including robotic surgery and image-guided therapies. “We are leaders in the field of minimally-invasive surgery,” Cookson says. “That means less pain, less scarring and a quicker recovery leading back to regular life.”

Stephenson is also a leading advocate for screening and routine preventative care for prostate cancer, the second-leading cause of cancer death among men in America.

The Route to OU

Cookson’s journey to his “happy place” at OU began 4,000 miles away in Edinburgh, Scotland, where he was one of seven children in a military family. His father’s U.S. Air Force job kept the family restationed, including a posting in Germany, where Cookson graduated from high school. A move to Oklahoma

put OU in his sights and he became the first in his family to attend college.

Cookson financed his undergraduate degree in journalism with scholarships, grants and jobs ranging from library clerk to loading trucks at UPS. “It was a lot of work, but that’s how I was raised, to work hard. I was always goal-oriented.”

Upon graduating from OU’s College of Medicine in 1988, he completed a residency in urology at the University of Texas-San Antonio, then a fellowship in urologic oncology at the prestigious Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York. After 15 years on the Vanderbilt faculty, he returned to OU, attracted by the prospect of developing a prostate and urologic cancer team at Stephenson.

Now settled in Oklahoma City, the heart of the Cookson family beats crimson. Wife Kimberly, a third-generation Oklahoman, is a travel adviser. He credits her with “the heavy lifting for raising the family” of three children and “keeping us grounded in family-first traditions.” Daughter Caroline, a nurse in the neonatal intensive care unit at Oklahoma Children’s Hospital OU Health, is pursuing a doctoral degree at OU’s Fran and Earl Ziegler College of Nursing, with a nurse practitioner’s degree, as well. Son Connor holds a math degree from OU and is heading toward an advanced degree in computer science. Youngest son Cooper is a freshman and linebacker on the OU Sooner football team.

Cookson’s own days start early, end late and are full of clinic

visits for dozens of patients, outpatient and inpatient surgeries, and administrative meetings.

But the work is worth it.

“I knew when I came back to Oklahoma that Stephenson Cancer Center could make a tremendous impact on integrated cancer care for people in Oklahoma,” he says. “We provide health equity—whatever your insurance or financial capabilities, you’re offered top-notch, state-of-the-art, multidisciplinary care. The lives of Oklahomans are positively impacted by the work of OU Health and the Stephenson Cancer Center. I am honored to be a part of it.” **S**

Connie Cronley is the author of several biographies of famous Oklahomans, including A Life on Fire: Oklahoma’s Kate Barnard. She lives in Tulsa, Okla.