

Knights at the research table

By Steve Bjerklie

The usual path to funding medical research is a well-worn route: get a good idea, discuss and develop it with colleagues, find a bit of funding to support a pilot study, hunt down grant funding to support a full research study, publish the results. Repeat as often as needed—for decades. Christopher Lowrey, M.D., a Geisel professor of medicine and of pharmacology and toxicology, has walked this trail more than once in his career, but his research into leukemia and sickle-cell diseases has also benefited from another kind of funding that he describes as “totally unique.”

Lowrey’s long-term relationship with the Knights of the York Cross of Honour, his research benefactor, keeps him off the grant-writing treadmill (at least partially) while providing the Knights with the satisfaction of supporting not just research, but a researcher’s passion and career as well. The relationship has gone beyond financial support to become a true friendship.

The Knights are members of the Convent General (in the United States, one of the array of Masonic organizations), which dates back to 1930. John Stracener, Grand Master-General for the group, describes it as a fully honorary organization: to be considered for membership, a candidate must have risen through a series of leadership roles in a Masonic organization. “Our purpose as a group is to serve those who we have served individually,” says Stracener, who lives near Nashville, Tenn. As an organization of leaders, the Knights bring acumen and expertise from several fields to bear on their charitable activities.

In the early 1960s the Knights established a Medical Research Foundation. It was the Grand Master-General at the time, Claude Gordon, who first proposed that the Foundation support the emerging cancer

research program at Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital. The Knights’ first official gift to the hospital was in 1967 in the amount of \$300. They have been giving ever since.

Lowrey’s connection to the Convent General began 14 years ago, when Robert Greenberg, M.D., then Cancer Center director, brought

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him to the Knights’ annual conclave. “I was doing basic hardcore science at the time,” Lowrey comments, “but working with the Knights changed my whole direction. They’re all about helping people, and that got me thinking—what could I do that would more directly benefit patients?” Today Lowrey’s lab focuses on developing new therapies for leukemia and sickle-cell disease.

By then the Knights were donating \$40,000 a year to Norris Cotton Cancer Center (founded in 1972), and their gifts have continued to increase. In 2012 the organization donated \$75,000 to research at the Cancer Center, and for the past several years the Knights’ contributions have been supplemented by \$25,000 from the Royal Order of Scotland of the United States, another Masonic group. Half of this money goes to support Lowrey’s research; the rest is allocated to other research projects by Cancer Center director Mark Israel, M.D.

Since their first gift 46 years ago, the Knights of the York Cross of Honour have now given nearly \$1.5 million to support research at the Cancer Center.

Each year Lowrey travels to the annual conclave to describe for the Knights how he is using their latest funding in his lab. Also annually, a contingent of Knights comes to the Cancer Center to tour the Lowrey lab and meet the research team there. “That means a lot to us,” says John Stracener. “He shows us exactly where our dollars are going and what kind of difference is being made.” Lowrey’s conclave visits are also popular, adds Stracener. “We love having him. He is a great guy, just a pleasure to know and support.”

“The Knights have been a huge influence on my work,” comments Lowrey. “They are a wonderful benefactor. It becomes a two-way relationship of gratitude that benefits patients directly. For me, that’s what medical research is all about.”



The long-term support for research that the Cancer Center has received from the Knights of the York Cross of Honour is “totally unique,” says Dr. Christopher Lowrey, pictured here (2nd row, far right) with Dr. Mark Israel and members of the group during their June 2009 visit to the Cancer Center.

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