



# UIC

## MEDICINE

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# Raising One of His Own



#### THE MENTOR

**Fady Charbel, MD,**  
talks with first-  
year resident  
**Obinna Emechebe-  
Kennedy, MD.**

#### A 44-year-old woman lies

unconscious on an operating table, head tilted toward her right shoulder, every inch of her body covered by blue fabric except for a triangular opening into her brain that shines brilliant red. The

operating room in the University of Illinois Medical Center at Chicago is dark, cold, quiet and relaxed as a team of doctors enters the fifth hour of the woman's surgery to clip multiple aneurysms in the woman's brain.

Everything changes with the arrival of Fady Charbel, MD, Res '93, head of the neurosurgery department at UIC. There's a rush of light and warm air from the outside corridor when he opens the door, and an infusion of noise as he continues a conversation with another doctor following behind him.

As he scrubs in and is brought up to speed about the operation, he turns toward another person in the room: first-year resident Obinna Emechebe-Kennedy, MD '07, PharmD '01, whom Charbel recruited to the UIC College of Medicine after they met when Emechebe-Kennedy was a pharmacy student at UIC. He is the first UIC College of Medicine graduate that Charbel has taken on as a resident in his six years as department head.

"I've always wanted our students to go somewhere else to broaden their experience," says Charbel, a faculty member since 1991, during a post-surgery conversation. "Eventually, I began to think that when the right mentoring relationship is in place, it's good for one of our students to stay."

This change of view is especially noteworthy given that the program only accepts one new resident each academic year. The appointment is evidence of Charbel's commitment to adaptation and innovation—the very traits that drew Emechebe-Kennedy to him. Now, as Emechebe-Kennedy begins to train under his mentor, he must learn quickly, Charbel-style.

In the operating room, Emechebe-Kennedy stands silently a couple of feet behind the surgeons, his arms clasped behind his back. He's about six months into his first year of residency, and has completed rotations in trauma surgery, general surgery, surgical oncology, and otorhinolaryngology (ear, nose and throat). Neurosurgery is his ultimate destination, but it's still new to him. He observes quietly until Charbel starts giving him orders: Change the electrode coagulator to 25. Check to see if there's an MRI on file. Take a look through the microscope and describe what you see.

Emechebe-Kennedy peers into the microscope and asks, "Is that the terminus?" "No," Charbel responds, "it's the carotid artery."

"I always ask residents questions during surgery, both to see how they answer and to include them in the thought process," Charbel explains. "The interaction changes over time. It begins as a mentorship and eventually becomes an apprenticeship. As residents progress, they can assimilate more."

Obinna Emechebe-Kennedy always has been drawn to healthcare, but his reasons for pursuing a career in medicine have grown more intimate and more painful with time. He was born in Nsukka, Nigeria, and during his childhood the poverty and lack of medical care in that country distressed him. When he was 9, he came to the southwest Chicago suburb of Orland Park to live with his sister, who is 20 years older than him.

Two years later their father died of a stroke in Nigeria. "If it had been caught in time, or if the doctors there had proper diagnostic tools, he could still be alive," Emechebe-Kennedy says during a rare break from his rotations. When he enrolled at UIC as an undergraduate, he chose pharmacy as his major—it is his sister's profession, and he had seen the difference she makes to people in need of medicine.

Emechebe-Kennedy spent his last year of pharmacy school completing a set of clinical rotations, one of which was in the

neurosurgery unit at the hospital. He did well there, and, as a reward, he was offered a chance to watch surgery in the operating room. The procedure involved bypassing blocked arteries in a stroke patient's brain. "It was an awakening for me, one of those experiences where you find your place," he remembers.

He spoke to his pharmacy-rotation adviser about medical school—and he spoke to Charbel, whom he'd met on his neurosurgery rotation. Both of them encouraged him to apply to UIC, and within a week—while still wrapping up his doctorate in pharmacy, and with a job waiting for him at the pharmaceutical company Abbott Laboratories—he started studying for the MCAT.

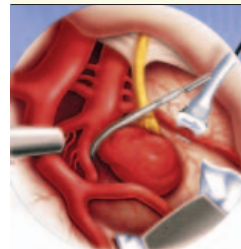
After graduating from the College of Pharmacy in spring 2001, he enrolled in the College of Medicine the following August and began asking Charbel for advice at every step: what to research, when to take exams, where to focus his efforts. During his third year, he turned to Charbel when tragedy again struck his family. His mother had died of a stroke in Nigeria. Once again, says Emechebe-Kennedy, "It was just a matter of not being able to get to the hospital in time." With Charbel's support, Emechebe-Kennedy took a year off from medical school to research neural stem cell behavior as a research fellow at the National Institutes for Health in Bethesda, Md. He used the time to clear his head, to make sure he was on the right path. He came back more focused. He needs to be, as one of Charbel's residents.

Neurosurgery residency is a seven-year program in which doctors spend up to 30 consecutive hours on call, gradually increasing their responsibilities to the point where they can perform complicated, delicate surgeries. In addition to drilling residents in medical school subjects such as anatomy until they are second nature, the program also trains them to be extraordinarily calm and confident while conducting procedures with life-and-death stakes.

Charbel exudes that quiet assurance.

He sits perfectly still for hours in surgery, a trait that belies his philosophy of medicine. He tells his residents to learn not just by watching him, but to think about how they might improve upon his work. He takes his own advice: He developed the Charbel Flow Probe, which measures blood flow within blood vessels and is in use worldwide. In surgery today, he's testing a new laser measurement tool that gauges blood flow without touching the vessels. As he clips one aneurysm after another—he finds seven—he continues to ask for Emechebe-Kennedy's impressions of the operation.

#### Charbel Flow Probe



**One of Fady Charbel's inventions, the probe is used by neurosurgeons at major academic institutions in the U.S. and around the world.**

"I want to make sure they cover all the basics, everything that's expected of them, and also push them to do a little more than they think they can do," he says of his residents. No wonder Charbel gets along with Emechebe-Kennedy, who says he approaches medicine the same way.

**"I came here because Charbel is an innovator, and I want to find out how to push boundaries," he says. "There's no way I can perform this operation right now. But I can put myself in the surgeons' position and think about what I will do if a situation like this ever comes up again."**

It will be years before Emechebe-Kennedy finally sits in the head surgeon's chair leading an operation like this one. Perhaps he will think back to the operation he's watching today; maybe the methods will have evolved thanks to one of Charbel's technological innovations. Regardless, the patient that day will rely on Emechebe-Kennedy's intelligence, skill, experience and drive—qualities for which she can be grateful to both her doctor and his mentor.