

Is There a Doctor in the House?

by Masarah Van Eyck

As the first black woman and only the sixth African American student to graduate from the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health (SMPH) in 1975, Ada M. Fisher, MD, MPH, has made a career out of forging new paths in her quest to help people.

A passionate physician, she has devoted her working life to community medicine as well as public health administration, motivated by the conviction that all citizens deserve access to high-quality and affordable healthcare within the free enterprise system.

In the past decade, Fisher has even taken her politics to the polling booth, making runs from her home state of North Carolina for Republican seats in both the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. Although she has not won to date, undeterred, she'll try again this year for a seat in the U.S. Congress.

Hoping to represent the North Carolina 12th Congressional District, Fisher capitalizes on her medical background in her campaign slogans, prompting voters to "Get a Doctor in the House" and pronouncing her "10-Step Prescription" platform as "Good for What Ails Us."

And not surprisingly, her platform, which emphasizes job growth and national security, also includes plans for serious healthcare reform. Paramount among them is fashioning a more



In her quest for a seat in the U.S. Congress, Fisher calls for an affordable healthcare system with responsible tort reform, less expensive drugs and an emphasis on preventive medicine.

affordable healthcare system with responsible tort reform, less expensive drugs and an emphasis on preventive medicine. (For more, visit Fisher's Web site at www.dradamfisher.org or fisherforcongress.org.)

"The reality is that with war, education and health entitlements, you're not going to get more services from the government," Fisher says from her home in Salisbury. "Primary care alone is just not going to cut it—this is about dis-ease in society."

Fisher should know. Since her earliest years in medicine, she has confronted forms of social dis-ease in both rural and corporate America. In her career she has served as the detoxification director for substance abuse for a 16-county catchment area at John Umstead Hospital in Butner, North Carolina; industrial physician for the Y-12 Plant

at Martin Marietta Energy Systems, Inc. (now Lockheed Martin) in Oak Ridge, Tennessee; medical director of Amoco Oil Company as well as manager of medical policies and practices for Amoco Corporation; and a Veterans Administration occupational health services director. Through it all, she continued to see patients.

"I was always involved in a lot of hands-on care," she says. "One of the problems is that people who go into administration too often don't have that practical, broad-based hands-on experience." For Fisher, it was the hands-on work that drew her to public health in the first place.

Having returned to her home state after a residency at the Family Medicine Program, an affiliate of the University of Rochester in New York, Fisher worked for two years in rural North Carolina,

Fisher to be Featured at July Reunion

Ada Fisher, MD '75, MPH, will be the special guest speaker at a reunion of the African American alumni of the School of Medicine and Public Health this summer.

Organized by Rev. Ronald V. Myers, MD '85, the reunion will be held in conjunction with the UW Department of Afro-American Studies. Several events are scheduled for Thursday through Sunday, July 20-23, 2006.

Fisher will speak on Friday in the Health Sciences Learning Center, the school's new home. Tours of the new building will be held, and current African American medical students will be on hand to greet returning alumni.

A concert featuring the Experimental Improvisational Black Music Ensemble (EIBME) is planned for Saturday evening, July 22, beginning at 7 p.m. in the Union Theatre at Memorial Union. The concert will honor Jimmy Cheatham, former UW professor of music, and Jeannie Cheatham.

The reunion will kick off a fund-raising campaign for the Wisconsin African-American Alumni Center in Madison. The \$10 million project would house a performing arts center, living space for historically black fraternities and a history center.



As a second year medical student, Fisher took notes in the medical microbiology laboratory.

in part to help pay off her student loans. Serving as the chief medical officer and medical director for the Plain View Health Center in Greenevers, North Carolina, with the National Health Services Corps, she was the only physician doing obstetrics in a county of 50,000 residents. It was during this service obligation that she witnessed firsthand the desperate state of healthcare in rural areas—and the isolation that can make such areas seem like less than attractive places for physicians to locate.

“That experience helped me to see that there are many people who are not receiving medical services who could be if the money was spent differently,” she says. She was moved to earn a Master in Public Health degree from the Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health (now their Bloomberg School of Public Health), and entered health services administration. She recently was able to apply some of those public health lessons offering medical assistance in Mississippi after hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

But it wasn't Fisher's medical career that first taught her to reach out to her larger community. Growing up in Durham, North Carolina, as the daughter of a Baptist minister, she learned early on the importance of family, community and service to others.

She also knew that she would have to learn to see beyond her familiar world and extend her vision. And so, after earning a bachelor of arts degree from the University of North Carolina in Greensboro, Fisher moved to Wisconsin for medical school (thanks, in part, to Cornelius Hopper, MD, an African American neurologist at UW, who helped recruit her to Madison).

“It was as far away from home as I could get. I knew I needed to broaden my experience base,” she says. “UW was looking for black students, and I wanted to be a doctor. It was a decent trade-off.”

The transition wasn't always easy. In addition to the shock of encountering a new culture, Fisher's father and grandfather died during her first semester away. What's more, her first-year studies proved to be a challenge—especially for one who struggled to see what she now calls “the big picture” in medicine. She wrestled with gross anatomy, offering that she was “petrified of dead folks, even though my brother runs a funeral home.

“I was struggling every day to keep up, so I'd return at night,” Fisher recalls. “And I tell you, there is nothing more frightening than those anatomy labs at two in the morning, with those rows of cadavers in tanks. Every little sound was unnerving!”

Furthermore, Fisher says, she found it highly ironic that racism could exist in Madison, known to be a bastion of liberalism, while small communities beyond the capital, where she spent

■ Ada M. Fisher, MD '75 , MPH



a good deal of time, could be more receptive to minorities.

But in the midst of these challenges, there were individuals who recognized her abilities and tenacity—and reached out to her.

Among them, Fisher names June Osborne, MD, now a national medical leader, who then taught virology and had sat on Fisher's admissions committee. When Fisher's grades faltered, Osborne took her aside, and together they worked to find solutions.

Not only did Fisher's grades steadily improve, but she also began the clinical portion of her education, where she could really excel. "I'm a people person," she explains, "so it was then that I got some idea of how it all hangs together."

Working with patients gave Fisher the opportunity to do what she did best—care for people in distress. "Coming from life as a preacher's kid, I could deal with life and death—I'd sign up for the cancer services when others didn't, for example."

Similarly encouraging for Fisher were her summer externships. She spent the summer following her freshman year in the small town of Baldwin, Wisconsin. The following year, the school's Family Medicine Club asked her to share her experiences with fellow members who were about to embark on similar externships. The address was adapted for use in *The New Physician* journal, with Fisher's portrait appearing on the cover.

The summer externships were arranged by pediatrician Mark Hansen, MD, and with the monetary support of community benefactors Mr. and Mrs. Wayne Brown, who were aware of Fisher's financial constraints. Thanks to them, she happily worked every summer following a handful of patients through their pregnancies.

"They were delightful people," she says of Hansen and Brown. In fact, it was partially Fisher's wish to visit with Hansen that brought her back to Madison last July to attend the 30th reunion of her Class of 1975.

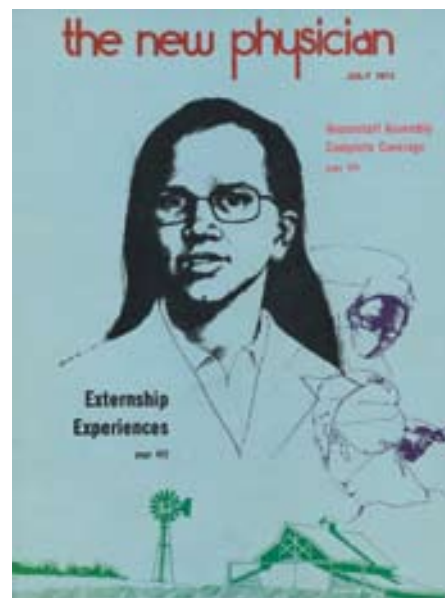
Fisher also drew inspiration and got encouragement from UW cancer researchers who were prominent nationally during the 1970s. These included Charles Heidelberger, MD, who invented the cancer drug 5-FU, and Nobel Laureate Howard Temin, MD, who discovered RNA-DNA polymerase.

Looking back, it is clear that both the challenges in Fisher's medical education and her early clinical experiences encouraged her to serve as an advocate for others—whether patients, fellow black students, veterans or the multitudes of corporate employees and common citizens she has reached as a health administrator. She regularly receives letters from former patients who have benefited from her care, and she dotes on pictures of the babies she delivered who are now grown.

Fisher says that though she had challenges in medical school, on balance the experiences were life changing and enriching. "Wisconsin was pivotal in my intellectual growth and I will always be grateful and appreciative to the people of Wisconsin for giving me, an out-of-state student, a chance to fulfill a dream."

Fisher has been grateful since the beginning.

"The first money I made after graduating from medical school I spent on a lifetime membership in the Wisconsin Medical Alumni Association," she says. "I always wanted to be a doctor, and Wisconsin gave me that chance."



*Fisher's account of her summer externship spent in Baldwin, Wisconsin, appeared as the cover story in the journal *The New Physician*.*