Message from the CEO

It’s an honor to call Moffitt Cancer Center my new home and a privilege to serve alongside over 7000 incredible team members. I have always admired the cancer center for its innovation in cancer and research discovery. This year, I am looking forward to working with teams across the institution and in the community to further elevate Moffitt’s role in patient care, research and education.

I am particularly interested in the work that is being done to close the gap in cancer health disparities. It is no secret that as scientists develop advancements in cancer research, progress has been slower in Black communities. This is a serious issue that often goes unnoticed. I am pleased that at Moffitt we are addressing this problem through funded research and education.

Because of groups like the George Edgecomb Society, Moffitt can study aggressive cancers that impact Black/African American communities and find new ways to actively treat those cancers.

I look forward to meeting you all and working together to close the gap in cancer health disparities. Thank you for your ongoing support.

Patrick Hwu, MD
President and CEO

Continuing Our Focus On Cancer Health Disparities Research

Dear friends,

After the incredible challenges and breakthroughs of 2020, we hope that you and your loved ones are safe and well. Here at Moffitt Cancer Center, we are ready to take on this new year and continue the progress we made in the midst of last year’s hardships.

With your support, Moffitt has continued to rise to the challenge by providing the safest environment possible for its cancer patients and their families. Your gifts also have enabled Moffitt to continue its focus on cancer health disparities research, a priority that only continues to grow in importance at the cancer center and across the country.

In this edition of our newsletter, you will find information about 2020’s George Edgecomb Society (GES) grant awards, including a profile on two-time grant recipient Dr. Kosj Yamoah. You also will get an introduction to Dr. Tiffany Carson, our newest talented recruit furthering Moffitt’s cancer health disparities research thanks in part

Continued on page 4

Cancer In The Black Community: A Research Update

Join Moffitt for a virtual research update that will feature some of the nation’s top health disparities researchers in prostate, ovarian, and pancreatic cancer.

Thursday, Feb. 11, 2021 | 5:30 to 7 p.m.
VIRTUAL PRESENTATION

The event is hosted by the George Edgecomb Society, Moffitt Diversity and Moffitt’s Office of Community Outreach, Engagement and Equity.

REGISTER NOW

Bucs’ William Gholston
Funds GES Research Projects

William Gholston, a defensive end with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, has announced a gift to the George Edgecomb Society to fund three research projects on cancer health disparities. Gholston has been personally touched by the disease as his father died of cancer and his mother is a breast cancer survivor. Read more about Gholston’s gift here.
GES Grant Recipients Are ‘Moving The Needle’

Supporters like you are funding impactful research aimed at improving equity in cancer research and care through our George Edgecomb Society (GES) grants. Created in 2018, GES grants are awarded to cancer health disparities research projects that are expected to move the needle in a significant way. In addition to creating real change in addressing cancer health disparities, these grants honor the legacy left by George Edgecomb, Hillsborough County’s first African American judge.

In 2020, the George Edgecomb Society awarded two grants of $75,000 each to fund the following research projects:

Dr. Alvaro Monteiro, PhD, received a grant to model the effects of BRCA1 mutations in ovarian cancer in African American women. This type of abnormal gene is found at higher rates among women of color, and it is associated with a form of ovarian cancer that can be more aggressive, harder to treat and more likely to recur.

Dr. Kosj Yamoah, MD, PhD, received his second GES grant to investigate cancer-derived explants as a novel model system to study differences between African American and European American patients. (See the profile of Dr. Yamoah to learn about how the GES grant has fueled his groundbreaking health disparities research.)

Since 2018, the George Edgecomb Society has funded seven investigators totaling $400,000.

Dr. Kosj Yamoah: Bringing Equity to Cancer Research

If you’ve been involved with Moffitt’s George Edgecomb Society since the beginning, then you probably know of superstar researcher Dr. Kosj Yamoah. If not his name, then you might remember hearing him speak passionately about his health disparities research, or even more likely, recall seeing his bright, enthusiastic face and thinking, “How could someone so young have accomplished so much?”

If you had that reaction to the phenom, you would have had good reason. Dr. Yamoah grew up in Ghana and made international news when he became the youngest person ever to be admitted to high school in Africa at just seven years of age. Dr. Yamoah then began college at age 13, and after completing two years of medical school in Ghana at 19, he traveled to the United States to pursue a medical scientist training program in New York City. “I was on a path to becoming a physician very early on,” Dr. Yamoah says, “but I also was interested in medical research, and the opportunities for that were not available [in Ghana].”

After completing his medical residency and earning his PhD from Mount Sinai in New York, Dr. Yamoah set out to determine where he would make his mark. “I wanted to pursue the medical scientist program to both see patients and do research, and I was really looking for my niche in terms of being a scientist,” he says. “I would take a lot of trips and go to East Africa, Burundi, Rwanda, India, Mumbai to figure out what’s going on, and I realized that chronic disease was a problem. But it wasn’t being talked about, because everything was about infectious diseases at that time.”

Because of Dr. Yamoah’s research mentors, prostate cancer “found him” — a fortunate turn of events in many ways. He quickly noticed a disparity in prostate cancer outcomes for Black men and began working to understand this issue. “I began to recognize that there was a problem on the African continent and the islands — in the Bahamas, Jamaica, and all those other places,” he says. “Basically, I saw that men of African origin did have a huge problem.”

“We think we can develop novel targeted, immuno-radiotherapeutic approaches that work better for African American men.”

This discovery coupled with the experiences he had traveling around the world led Dr. Yamoah to commit himself and his life’s work to addressing problems like disparities in prostate cancer research.

In his first GES-funded research project, Dr. Yamoah tackled prostate cancer disparities in Black/African American men by starting from the ground up. “I needed to study health
disparities in prostate cancer. "And my question was, 'can I identify patient samples that have complete clinical data – which includes outcomes data, tumor tissue and blood samples – that I can actually study to understand the biology of prostate cancer in black men.'"

After mining Moffitt’s world-renowned Total Cancer Care® database, Dr. Yamoah came up with less than 10 patient samples that had all of the elements he needed to conduct a study. He then contacted the National Cancer Institute and began a complicated pursuit that yielded only 50 additional samples, but the sample size was still too small. To address this critical challenge, Dr. Yamoah and his team proposed the idea of creating a re-usable tumor model to conduct their research. They received a $50,000 grant from the George Edgecomb Society to pursue this idea. Dr. Yamoah explains: “Initially, we were going to develop organoid models that can be reused for research multiple times.” But during the process, we realized key things that we didn’t know before...that helped us understand opportunities for further development.” He and his team were able to collect and deliver prostate tumor tissue from the operating room to the laboratory within two hours, which enabled them to better understand the tumor microenvironment in African American men. Using the findings from this initial GES grant, Dr. Yamoah and his team applied for and received $1.7 million in funding to continue this work.

In addition, Dr. Yamoah became the first two-time recipient last year when he received another GES grant award for his follow-up project. The second round of funding is already paying off: “We are learning that most African American tumors seem to have a unique interaction with the tumor microenvironment,” he explains. “They have a little more immunosuppressive microenvironment as compared to their non-African American counterparts.” He and his team also are discovering that these tumors may be more sensitive to radiation treatment. “So, when we put this together, we think we can develop novel targeted, immuno-radiotherapeutic approaches that work better for African American men.”

Dr. Yamoah is well aware that these critical findings would not be possible without funding from GES donors. He says, “If you think about it, GES funds great ideas lacking preliminary data. Those ideas, as good as they are, are not competitive yet for federal funding. So, GES provides the grassroots funding mechanism that allows them to be ready for primetime.”

Thanks to George Edgecomb Society supporters, Moffitt recently recruited a brilliant mind and experienced cancer health disparities researcher. Tiffany L. Carson, PhD, MPH, a respected leader in the field of preventive medicine, will be using her talents to accelerate both cancer health disparities and obesity research at Moffitt. Funding from GES members was instrumental in recruiting Dr. Carson, who most recently served as associate professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Get to Know Dr. Tiffany Carson

1. Tell us a little bit about your background: Where did you grow up? How did you end up following this career path?

I grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, and I’ve lived there for most of my life. I attended undergrad at Florida State University, where I majored in biology, initially wanting to be a pre-med major but eventually learning that it wasn’t the best way for me. Still, I wanted to do something to impact population health. So, after completing my undergrad I decided to go to graduate school in the School of Public Health at UAB, and I got my master’s and doctorate degrees in epidemiology.

I always had an interest in health disparities. From the beginning of my research career, I was very aware of how illness and disease disproportionately affected underserved communities, communities of color, and, essentially, people who look like me.

2. Why did you decide to come to Moffitt?

Aside from the Florida beaches? [laughs] I’ve been connected to Moffitt for several years in a couple of different roles. The main connection started through my role as an institutional representative for the National Cancer Institute’s Geographic Management of Cancer Health Disparities Program (GMaP), which is a regional
program to help promote cancer health disparities research and to improve the pipeline of researchers from underrepresented backgrounds.

The central office for GMaP is at Moffitt Cancer Center. I was an institutional representative for UAB, but in that role I got to meet a lot of the investigators here and become more aware of the work that’s going on at Moffitt. And I’ve really been impressed with what I’ve learned over the years. It’s clear that there is a commitment to cancer health disparities work at Moffitt – a true commitment to investing in the researchers and the work needed to try to understand, reduce, and eliminate disparities.

Also, my passion for team science and collaboration is one of the things that attracted me to Moffitt. From my time meeting with other members of the Moffitt faculty, the collaborative atmosphere was palpable. I believe that multidisciplinary teams are truly needed to answer the complex health issues that we face as a society.

What are you planning to focus on specifically at Moffitt?

I’ll be starting work on two newly funded R01 research projects that support both of my lines of work. One is more squarely in the obesity space, and it’s looking at the role of stress management and how that relates to weight loss efforts among Black women with obesity and elevated stress levels. That will be a randomized control trial where the gold standard behavioral weight loss intervention is augmented with tailored stress management strategies to determine if that intervention leads to improved weight loss outcomes.

The second R01 is a little bit more on the biological side and supports my second line of research, which looks at the role of the gut microbiota in weight management, as well as cancer prevention as it relates to colorectal cancer.

How important is philanthropic support for making this a reality?

Oh, my goodness. I think philanthropy and donor support are huge. From my own personal experience, the very first grant that I received as a principal investigator was the result of donor support.

In this current funding environment, it’s extremely competitive, and often times it doesn’t take a huge amount of money to get the ball rolling. So, to have any additional support from philanthropists and other donor organizations can really help to number one, make a discovery in and of itself, but also provide important data to eventually go on and secure other larger grant mechanisms as well.

What do you see as the biggest health challenges facing Black Americans today, and how can we address those?

One of the biggest challenges facing Black health is the impact of generations of systemic inequality, inequity, and racism that continue to persist today. Research has shown the detrimental effects of discrimination and racism on the physical and mental health of Black individuals living in the U.S. Racism has been associated with increased inflammation, higher rates of stress, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. In addition to the direct effects on physiological and psychological well-being, structural racism also contributes to a disproportionate number of Black individuals in the U.S. facing less access to high quality health care, good education, fair and safe housing, and higher incomes, all of which affect health outcomes. This is a large, pervasive challenge that will require a culture shift, policy changes, significant resources and time to fully address.

Please join us in welcoming Dr. Carson to the Moffitt family! You can send her a welcome email at Tiffany.Carson@Moffitt.org

Continuing Our Focus On Cancer Health Disparities Research

to funding provided by the GES. And, you will want to sign up for two important events – a research update on cancer in the Black community and an upcoming golf tournament benefiting GES.

We look forward to connecting with you throughout this year to share more updates. If you have any questions or thoughts about how we can eliminate cancer health disparities and improve outcomes for the Black/African American community, please contact us.

Thank you again for supporting the George Edgecomb Society!

Regards,
Valerie H. Goddard
Chair, George Edgecomb Society
Member, Moffitt Institute Board
Member, Moffitt Hospital Board
Horus Construction Services, Inc., a 100% African American owned commercial general contracting company, is hosting a golf tournament to support the George Edgecomb Society.

HORUS President Jonathan Graham's father started the business as a small contracting firm and then later sold it to Graham once it became clear that his son was determined to take their family’s company to the next level. Graham recently sat down with us to talk about the tournament and why the missions of Moffitt and the George Edgecomb Society are important to support:

“I think that attention is not often given to Black ailments. So, I was very happy when Dr. [Lee] Green (vice president, diversity, public relations & strategic communications) told me about the George Edgecomb Society and how it could help benefit the Black community. And I also wasn’t aware of how many Black people are diagnosed with cancer. I had no idea.

Moffitt saves lives. Not only what they do for cancer, but what they do for the community. And the reason I say that is because of their intensity on diversity and inclusion. I’m just going to be straight: African Americans working at Moffitt and on Moffitt, is lifesaving.

I’m a partner with Barr & Barr with Fred Hames in leadership there. We have done a lot together, but Moffitt is our favorite client because it allows and encourages us to focus on inclusion so that we can spend extra time making sure African American businesses are included on a monumental project. That doesn’t happen every day. And I’m excited because I can help my community with building their capacity and opening their eyes up to new things. And so, for that reason, Moffitt is a lifesaver for these businesses.”

For more information about sponsoring or participating in this inaugural tournament, visit www.HORUSHookandSlice.com or contact Angela Williams at Angela.Williams@HORUS-CS.com or 813-519-2574.

You Can Make a Difference Today

None of the critical work you read about here would be possible without your support. Consider making a donation today to support Moffitt's George Edgecomb Society and ensure our efforts to eliminate health disparities in cancer research and patient care continue.

Cancer Health disparities negatively affect everyone, and the information learned from GES-funded projects benefit all patients at Moffitt and beyond. By making a gift today, or by including a gift to support Moffitt’s cancer health disparities in your will or other estate plans, you can help create lasting change that will revolutionize cancer care for the Black/African American community.

For more information about supporting the George Edgecomb Society, contact: Lorrin.Rucker@Moffitt.org or give now.