

# Dr. Charles A. LeMaistre

by Mary Jane Schier

One of Dr. Charles A. LeMaistre's early decisions as president of The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center was to begin integrating cancer prevention into the institution's original mission areas of patient care, research, and education. What started as a concept in 1979 has evolved into comprehensive cancer prevention research and service programs that today are widely considered among the most productive in the world.

Dr. LeMaistre's passion about cancer prevention began long before he arrived at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center. As the youngest member of the U.S. Surgeon General's first Advisory Committee on Smoking and Health, he helped write the historic report that in 1964 declared cigarette smoking caused lung cancer. At the time, he was a professor of internal medicine at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical School in Dallas, where he combined teaching with treating patients in several hospitals. The combination of having seen the toll that tobacco took on his patients and serving on a committee that could affect public policy motivated him to adopt smoking control as a professional and personal quest.

When Dr. LeMaistre assumed the presidency of M. D. Anderson in August 1978, he was only the second full-time president in the institution's history. He had worked closely with his predecessor and the M. D. Anderson faculty for more than a decade, including seven years as chancellor of the UT System. With M. D. Anderson having been named one of the country's first three Comprehensive Cancer Centers by the National Cancer Act of 1971, Dr. LeMaistre was exhilarated by the opportunities to enhance its model programs in patient care, research, and education—and especially to incorporate cancer prevention.

Dr. LeMaistre persuaded Dr. Guy R. Newell, deputy director of the National Cancer Institute and a cancer prevention authority, to join M. D. Anderson to develop priorities for the new mission area. Outstanding faculty were recruited in epidemiology, behavioral science, and clinical cancer prevention while interdisciplinary collaborations were formed. Scientists and clinicians throughout the institution and at other academic centers worked to accelerate studies of cancers linked to tobacco, diet, and the environment. One major recruit was Dr. Waun Ki Hong, a chemoprevention pioneer whose landmark studies have demonstrated how chemical compounds can halt or reverse the cancer process, particularly among individuals at risk for smoking-caused cancers.

In addition, Dr. LeMaistre was instrumental in the growth of M. D. Anderson's Science Park-Research Division in Smithville, where scientists explore the molecular mechanisms of environmental causes of cancer. He helped develop a trend-setting cancer prevention program for individuals and corporate employee groups at their worksites and assured the success of a five-year project to introduce cancer prevention practices to workers of gas pipeline companies and electric cooperatives in fourteen states.

He also championed an array of clinical programs that include extensive cancer screening and risk assessment in M. D. Anderson's innovative Cancer Prevention Center as well as numerous service programs that reach out to community groups to help make prevention practical. Smoking cessation, psychopharmacological treatments for nicotine addiction, genetic testing and counseling, and modification of harmful lifestyle habits are among services now offered in the Cancer Prevention Center. While national president of the American Cancer Society in 1986, he traveled extensively to promote his cancer prevention platform, particularly focusing on how many cancer deaths and other serious



Photo by Beryl Stirewski, Courtesy M. D. Anderson Cancer Center

health problems could be prevented if people stopped smoking or never started.

With scientific evidence mounting about the dangers of tobacco use and exposure to involuntary smoke, Dr. LeMaistre led development of a policy to make M. D. Anderson smoke-free on January 1, 1989, almost twenty-five years to the day after he helped announce the initial Surgeon-General's Report. As the nation's first hospital to take such action, it became a model for other health care institutions. During a national Conference on Tobacco Use in America he hosted that month at M. D. Anderson, Dr. LeMaistre appealed to health professionals, leaders of voluntary organizations, and public officials to mount an aggressive grassroots effort to reverse the soaring deaths and destruction caused by tobacco use.

Dr. LeMaistre was tireless in appealing to lawmakers, health professionals, teachers, and the public to heed the thousands of research reports that documented the harmful effects of smoking. He was the foremost medical expert who helped the Houston City Council adopt no-smoking ordinances for public places. In addition to many public and professional presentations, he wrote frequent newspaper essays in which he criticized deceptive marketing practices by the tobacco industry and cited statistics showing that smoking is the single most preventable cause of all morbidity and mortality in the nation.

For his contributions to shaping public policy regarding tobacco and his overall cancer prevention efforts, Dr. LeMaistre received the 1987 President's Award from the American Lung Association, the Texas Cancer Council's first Gibson D. (Gib) Lewis Award for Excellence in Cancer Control in 1988, the American Medical Association's Distinguished Service Award in 1995, and the American Cancer Society's Medal of Honor in 1998. He also received distinguished alumnus awards from both of his alma maters, the University of Alabama and Cornell University, and five honorary degrees in recognition of his achievements in medicine, higher education, and public health.

The vision that Dr. LeMaistre had twenty-five years ago will be celebrated in January 2005, when M. D. Anderson's new Cancer Prevention Building opens. The nine-level building will provide a central headquarters for the Division of Cancer Prevention and Population Sciences, bringing together faculty and staff in the Departments of Behavioral Science, Clinical Cancer Prevention, and Epidemiology along with an expanded Cancer Prevention Center.

One of Dr. LeMaistre's key appointments was naming Dr. Bernard Levin the first vice president for cancer prevention in 1994. Dr. Levin, an international authority on colorectal cancer, has developed the Division of Cancer Prevention and Population Sciences into a model for other multifaceted programs around the world. For Dr. Levin, the challenge is clear. "We know that up to two-thirds of all cancers may be prevented through healthy lifestyle changes, so our goal is to make cancer prevention practical for everyone." Dr. LeMaistre retired as M. D. Anderson's president in 1996, but his mission to promote cancer prevention continues on full heartedly. ■

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