

FEATURED IN THE PRIVATE JOURNEY[®] MAGAZINE

THE SPECIALIST



DOCTOR/ DETECTIVE

DR. LEON SMITH

AS A YOUNG MAN, LEON SMITH WAS asked to play for the Yankees. He declined the offer only to end up hitting it out of the park in a completely different field. Dr. Leon Smith is one of the most respected leaders in the highly complex field of infectious diseases. For more than half a century, he has been making a difference in the lives of hundreds of thousands of people around the world, but it's New Jersey that takes the greatest pride in his long and distinguished career. Smith was Past Chairman of Medicine and Past Chief of Infectious Diseases at Saint Michael's Hospital in Newark, New Jersey where he was a constant and forceful presence for five decades. "I am always interested in helping the underprivileged," Smith says. His commitment to serving impoverished patients is evident in his track record. It was at Saint Michael's Hospital that he established the first free inner-city medical clinic. He also opened a hepatitis clinic, a leprosy clinic, "...as a matter of fact, my wife Peggy and I worked at a leprosarium with the nuns before we went on our honeymoon," and a 'fever of unknown origin' clinic. Smith, however, is most renowned for opening the first HIV/AIDS clinic in New Jersey, the second in the country, when panic over the disease was at its height.

Smith clearly remembers the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and how he rallied assistance in setting up a clinic, "I'll never forget when this epidemic started and we were the first to see it. We didn't know what it was. We thought it used to be a gay-related disease. We saw it in New York...we saw it in New Jersey. I went to the Archbishop and I said, 'look, there's a big epidemic starting here. What do you want us to do?'" With blessings from the Archbishop, Smith went ahead and established one of the largest clinics in the United States. He explains, "We had a whole floor, one hundred patients with HIV. We had some famous patients, too. One was the president's wife's hairdresser. He got a call almost every day from her to see how he was doing."

Thanks to people like Smith, Smith's family and his son-in-law — all renowned doctors in their own right — HIV has become easier to treat than diabetes. Patients infected with the HIV virus who are in treatment have a close-to-normal life expectancy — unlike those with diabetes. Smith is concerned with the diabetes epidemic in this country today, "Diabetes is both a metabolic and genetic disease and you need to hit more targets. It is a devastating and very difficult disease to treat. It's associated with obesity, which is a very big problem." He attributes the conveniences of modern society to the rise of the obesity epidemic and counsels patients to forgo a sedentary lifestyle for a more active one, "exercise is the best line of defense against obesity."

So what are infectious diseases? Smith explains, "infectious diseases can happen when the human body comes into contact with bacteria, viruses,

parasites and any other kinds of environmental agents." He also goes on to say that to fully understand infectious diseases, it's important to understand the history of the world. Smith considers himself a hybrid, a cross between medical historian and detective. A perfect example of how he puts his problem-solving skills to work occurred when an elderly patient came to him with a condition that proved mysterious for a number of physicians before him. Smith recalls, "Here was this 86 year-old woman from Israel with a fever of unknown origin that had lasted for over a year. She already had every test in the world. I asked one question... 'Where were you born and raised?' She said 'Poland.' To me, Poland translates to typhus." And just like that, Smith solved the mystery.

Smith is proud of the impact he has made on countless patients, doctors and hospitals, but one of his greatest accomplishments is The Smith Infectious Diseases Foundation (www.LGSmithFoundation.org), established by Smith himself. It is here that he has been channeling most of his time and energy of late. The primary mission of this world-renowned foundation is to promote awareness and provide research and information on infectious diseases to not just patients, but to doctors and healthcare workers as well. As Smith points out, "infectious diseases is not a very popular field. It's not a field in which you can make a lot of money, so people are not going into it. When I came to New Jersey, I was the first one. I have trained over 330 specialists since 1962. I have trained more people than anybody in history. And, I have put at least one or two infectious disease specialists in every hospital in New Jersey."

Smith is fearless in his search for answers to many of the diseases that continue to plague the modern world, "the only way out of the dark ages is through research and education," he explains. His career and his family are living examples of this credo. — TPJ ♣

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