

Cancer Is Cruel

Category: Cancer

written by Ateh Zi | December 12, 2025

Cancer is cruel, truly the emperor of all maladies. I witnessed its devastation firsthand fifteen years ago, when I lost my father to glioblastoma just six months after his diagnosis.

Today, shadowing my mentor at the oncologic clinic, I was reminded of that pain. A 50-year-old patient with Stage 4 gastric cancer, baffled by his diagnosis, asked my mentor, his oncologist, what had caused his illness. The oncologist replied, "It's complex and difficult to pinpoint. Your genetics, diet, smoking, alcohol use, and bacterial infections may have all played a role. So can your race. Being a Hispanic male increases your risk of gastric cancer."

As a medical student, I've learned about these risk factors. But hearing that his race makes him more vulnerable to cancer felt especially cruel. As an African American man with a family history of cancer, I have a hard time fully comprehending the racial disparities in cancer risk. They haunt me and are a key reason I aspire to become an oncologist: to understand, confront, and ultimately help dismantle the forces that make cancer outcomes unequal.

My recent clinical experience also exposed me to the complex nature of cancer care. Today, I saw patients with different gastrointestinal cancers. Some have achieved a complete response to treatment, others have showed stable disease, and a few have moved in and out of remission before eventually enrolling in clinical trials as their treatment options became limited.

"I am ready to go," lamented a patient who was suffering from harsh side effects of chemotherapy. However, my mentor, his oncologist, was relentless—determined to continue exploring the best evidence-based treatment options for his patient. I witnessed what comprehensive cancer care truly involves: a coordinated team effort that focuses not only on treating the illness but also on supporting the entire patient and preserving their quality of life.

Listening to patients with cancer share their lived experiences as they struggle through the ups and downs of this disease feels like riding an emotional roller coaster alongside them. Their stories reveal moments of fear, hope, strength, and uncertainty, and being present for each of these moments is both humbling and deeply moving.

I wake up every morning inspired by these stories—including my dad's unsuccessful battle with glioblastoma. My ultimate goal is to build a robust clinical and research toolbox that will equip me to tackle pertinent questions in cancer research and make meaningful contributions to the field of oncology.

Ateh Zi

Tucson, Arizona