

Dr. Kenneth Forde, Surgeon Who Fostered Cancer Screening, Dies at 85

By Sam Roberts

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Dr. Kenneth A. Forde, a pioneering surgeon who helped educate the public about cancer risks by performing a colonoscopy on Katie Couric that was later televised, died on June 2 at his home in Scarborough, N.Y. He was 85.

The cause was heart failure, according to his son, Trevor.

For much of Dr. Forde's 40 years teaching clinical surgery, he was the only black person on Columbia University's medical school faculty.

Dr. Forde promoted the colonoscopy as a routine nonsurgical means of detecting early signs of gastrointestinal and colorectal cancer and removing precancerous polyps. In the procedure, a flexible tube tipped with a light and tiny camera is inserted through the rectum and extended into the lower intestine, also called the colon, as the doctor watches the examination on a television monitor.

He had entered the field early, when he returned from the Army to work at Columbia-Presbyterian in 1966, which was less than a decade after the flexible fiber optic endoscope had been invented.

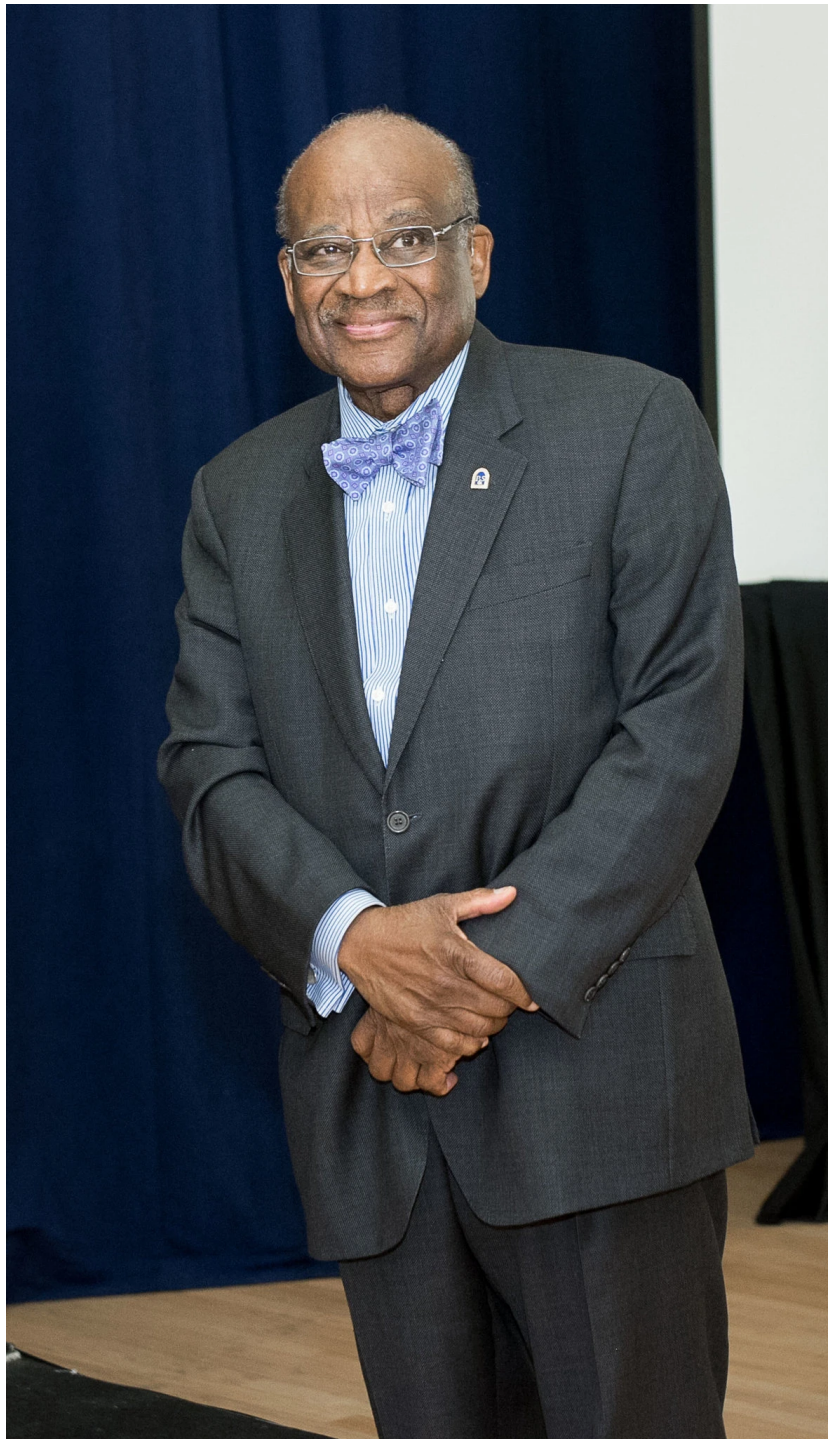
Dr. Forde was also instrumental in elevating diagnostic and surgical endoscopy into a commonly taught academic discipline.

In 2000, Ms. Couric won a Peabody Award for her NBC News series called "Confronting Colon Cancer," a disease that had killed her 42-year-old husband, Jay Monahan, a lawyer, two years earlier. Dr. Forde was recommended to her by a mutual acquaintance, a gastroenterologist who had been one of his students.

Nearly seven million television viewers witnessed the videotaped procedure, generating a nationwide spike in the number of colonoscopies. Researchers described it as the Couric Effect.

"I decided I wanted to explain colon cancer screening to viewers of the 'Today Show' and destigmatize the colonoscopy," Ms. Couric recalled in a phone interview. "Ken was the lucky guy, and he was the perfect doctor for the job."

She added: "His calm and caring demeanor, I think, helped put people at ease and made them less trepidatious about the procedure. Not only did the number of colonoscopies increase dramatically, but I also had a number of people say they appreciated that I had selected an African-American doctor. I said, I never really thought about that."



For many years, Dr. Forde, pictured here in 2016, was the only black faculty member at Columbia's medical school. "You have to know how not to accept denial of privilege, or to get caught up in confrontation or blame, but find a way to get around it and overcome it," he said. Columbia University Irving Medical Center

Dr. Forde had.

"Race," his great-grandmother had taught him, "is something you run — and win."

He had blamed his skin color, though, for two humiliating memories: While attending college and moonlighting as an orderly, a surgeon summarily ordered him out of the operating room; and when, as a fourth-year medical student, he showed up to apply for an internship at St. Luke's Hospital in Manhattan (now Mount Sinai St. Luke's), he was told dismissively not to bother, because no black had been recruited to the house staff before.

"I learned early on that you have to know how not to accept denial of privilege, or to get caught up in confrontation or blame," Dr. Forde said, "but find a way to get around it and overcome it."

Kenneth Avril Forde was born on July 6, 1933, in Manhattan to Kenneth and Aileen (Greene) Forde, immigrants from Barbados.

He was sent to live with an aunt in Barbados, then a British colony, for his primary and secondary education, which included memorizing much of Shakespeare. He considered becoming an Episcopal priest, but gravitated toward medicine instead. Heeding Duncan's demand in "Macbeth," he said — "So well thy words become thee as thy wounds;/ They smack of honor both. Go get him surgeons" — he decided to specialize in surgery.

He had hoped to attend Oxford or Cambridge in England, he said, but his parents couldn't afford the tuition. Returning to Manhattan, he earned a bachelor of science degree from City College of New York, where he worked part-time as a teaching assistant in biology. A family friend encouraged him, as a black man, to pursue a more level career path in education rather than in medicine.

But he persevered and graduated in 1959 from the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, where he was the only black student in his class. He interned at Bellevue and Presbyterian hospitals and served as an Army surgeon in West Germany.

Dr. Forde joined the Columbia medical college faculty in 1966 and became a full professor of clinical surgery in 1983. He was named president of the New York Surgical Society, the first black to hold that office, in 1986. A decade later, the Kenneth A. Forde Professorship in Surgery was established at Columbia in his honor.

Dr. Forde was an author of more than 125 scientific papers and also produced educational videotapes on medical procedure.

After he retired in 2006, he became a trustee of Columbia University and of NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital and remained at the college as a visiting professor.

He married Kareitha Ollivierre in 1957; she died in 2017. He is survived by their son, Trevor; two grandchildren; and his sister, Lolita Chandler-Crumpley. He lived in Scarborough, N.Y.

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