

The biography of the heart and soul of the movie Concussion: Dr. Omalu M.D.

Written by WRITTEN BY PATRICIA TURNIER LL.M AND LL.D CANDIDATE IN 2016
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[Dr. Bennet Omalu](#) was born in Nigeria (where he learned to speak Igbo and Pigeon English) during the Civil War. He is the sixth of seven siblings. His mother worked as a seamstress while his father occupied roles such as civil mining engineer, community leader in Enugu-Ukwu and deputy director of mines. Thus, the [physician](#) comes from a family that values [higher education](#). For instance, his younger sister holds a PhD degree from Scotland in energy law.

[Dr. Omalu](#) started primary school at the age of three. He outperformed the older children in his class. He learned how to read at three like Oprah Winfrey, [Johnnie Cochran](#), Shirley Chisholm, Condoleezza Rice and Toni Morrison. Being exposed to education so early definitely helped them to rise up. Later, the pathologist enrolled into the Federal Government College Enugu for secondary school. He began medical school at the age of sixteen at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka. In 1990, he obtained a MBBS (Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery) in Nigeria. He graduated from medical school in 1990. Albeit disappointed by the political situation of his country, he started to look for opportunities in America. He looked for scholarships. Hence, Dr. Omalu arrived first in Seattle, Washington in 1994 to finish an epidemiology fellowship at the University of Washington. In 1995, he enrolled in Columbia University's Harlem Hospital Center for a residency training program in anatomic and clinical

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pathology.

Dr. Omalu has eight post-nominal titles and will probably continue to acquire more degrees for the rest of his life. More precisely, the physician possesses eight advanced degrees: MD, MBA, MPH, CPE, DABP-AP, CP, FP, NP with board certifications. He is a forensic pathologist and neuropathologist, a Chief Medical Examiner at San Joaquin County, and a professor (where he teaches at the UC Davis pathology department) among other occupations. The physician has six sub-specialties: Anatomic Pathology, Clinical Pathology, Forensic Pathology, Neuropathology, Epidemiology and Medical Management. Dr. Omalu obtained fellowships in pathology and neuropathology via the University of Pittsburgh in 2000 and 2002 respectively. Dr. Omalu strongly believes that America is a land of opportunity. He has not wasted his time since he arrived in the U.S.; he now possesses substantial work experience and numerous degrees. He is part of the American intelligentsia. The doctor's accomplishments exude the American meritocracy. The media has reported that few [physicians](#) have a neuropathology's expertise. This helped Dr. Omalu to detect the presence of abnormal proteins in the brain of the late football player Mike Webster. This athlete's case will be displayed later.

In 2002, Dr. Bennet Omalu became the first scientist to publish discoveries of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) in American football players while exercising his profession at the Allegheny County Coroner's office in Pittsburgh. Together with colleagues in the Department of Pathology at the University of Pittsburgh, Omalu published his discoveries in *Neurosurgery* in 2005 via an article entitled "Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy in a National Football League Player." Dr. Omalu had no problems with other researchers using his work to find solutions. Noteworthy, one of his colleagues was Dr. Wecht, a pathologist who has never avoided high-profile cases. He examined well-known deceased people such as JFK, Elvis and the six-year-old Jon Benét Ramsey.

At first, the article received little attention but in May 2006, the NFL's Mild Traumatic Brain Injury (MTBI) Committee asked for its retraction (even though the paper was supported by other scientists with its co-authors). Dr. Omalu refused and in November 2006, he published a second *Neurosurgery* article based on his discoveries while examining the brain of former NFL athlete Terry Long, who suffered from depression and killed himself in 2005 at the age of 45. The pathologist found a high level of tau proteins in Long's brain like a 90-year-old with advanced Alzheimer's. Later, Jeanne Marie Laskas turned the article into a book, *Concussion* (Penguin Random House, 2015). In the same year, the book was adapted into an eponymous motion picture where Dr. Omalu is the protagonist portrayed by Will Smith. The movie was also based on the 2009 GQ article entitled "Game Brain" penned by Laskas. The motion picture stars Will Smith as Dr. Bennet Omalu, a [Nigerian](#) forensic pathologist who fought efforts by the National Football League to quash his research on chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) brain damage suffered by professional football athletes. The movie also stars Alec Baldwin,

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Gugu Mbatha-Raw, and Albert Brooks. Columbia Pictures released the movie on Christmas day in 2015.

Dr. Omalu later collaborated with Dr. Julian Bailes (a neurosurgeon, concussion researcher, and then chairman of the Department of Neurosurgery at West Virginia University School of Medicine) and West Virginia attorney Robert P. Fitzsimmons to create the Brain Injury Research Institute, forming a brain and tissue bank.

Dr. Omalu has written three books: *Play Hard, Die Young*, (2008), *A Historical Foundation of CTE in Football Players*, (2014) and *Truth Doesn't Have a Side*, (2017). The first book is very informative. There is even a glossary at the end. The content is presented meticulously and thoroughly. In his first book, the author narrates how the prevalence of brain damage (especially dementia) is higher among football athletes compared to the general population.

In *Play Hard, Die Young*, readers learn in detail about what happened to the former football athlete Mike Webster during his retirement, meaning how the blows on his head and the hits on his body had a tragic impact on his life. In other words, there is in-depth information about his medical condition and autopsy. The book helps the reader to understand more utterly how the doctor discovered concussion. At some point, Webster was denied disability benefit. *GQ* wrote on December 13, 2006, seven years after the initial official complaint and four years after Webster's death, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit recognized that Webster had been totally and permanently disabled as a result of brain wounds from playing professional football. The court's decision resulted in an award of more than \$1.5 million to Webster's four children and former spouse. They had to fight for years to get there. In 2014, the NCAA accepted to settle a class-action head-injury lawsuit by founding a \$70 million fund. This money helps thousands of current and former college players to determine if they suffered brain injury by playing football, hockey, soccer and other contact sports. The NCAA also approved a single return to play policy spelling out how teams must treat athletes who receive head blows. Unlike the proposed settlement in a similar lawsuit against the NFL, the settlement stopped short of setting aside money for athletes who suffered brain injury. In 2013, former NFL players agreed to receive a \$765 million in a concussions lawsuit.

Again about *Play Hard, Die Young*, readers also learn in detail what happened to the late NFL player Terry Long. The athlete Andre Waters was another player who suffered from blows in the head. In the book, the public will find an excerpt of a loving and moving letter written by Andre Waters for his mom for Mother's Day. *Play Hard, Die Young* was praised by the journalists of *The Washington Post*, etc. Regarding the late NFL athletes, the book is dedicated to Mike Webster, Terry Long and Andre Waters. Dr. Omalu's latest book, a memoir, deserves to

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become a NY Times Best Seller. In it, we learn a lot about the physician such as how very humble he was and still is. During his journey in America, he was willing to do any job (as long as it was an honest one) to pursue his medical studies. Dr. Omalu represents a great example of motivation and determination. He had to work while attending medical school which is a full-time job in itself.

In his autobiography, Dr. Omalu narrates the hurdles he encountered after his CTE discovery such as the loss of his work. He lost practically everything he worked for. He went through almost a professional suicide. However, thanks to his faith, the support of his loved ones and friends, he managed to overcome his obstacles (the use of the testing techniques for housing in America, problems with the embassy during his first years in America, etc.). The author is not afraid in his memoir to share the emotions he felt when he encountered impediments. In his books, the author generously shares his knowledge and experiences. Nothing seemed off-limits. There is a lot of meat around the bone in terms of content. His latest book is also available in an audio format.



Dr. Omalu is a man who does not take himself too seriously. For instance, in his memoir he

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makes readers laugh when he pens about the time his wife made him change his clothes before his first meeting with Will Smith. The physician is not afraid to share that younger it bothered him to not be a tall man. Well, he was well-served by being portrayed in his movie by one of the tallest male actors in Hollywood.

His second book is published by one of the top American Publishing Houses, Harper Collins which offered him a lucrative deal. In a time when young people are often misguided by the myth of immediate success or instant gratification without efforts, Dr. Omalu's journey shows that hard work pays off. His path conjures the quote of Benjamin Franklin: "An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest". This definitely brings a breath of fresh air and it gives hope to people. In the memoir, readers will also learn the identities all the A-list African-American star actors considered to play the role of Dr. Omalu.

Overall, the autobiography goes beyond Dr. Omalu's life. Readers learn about the history of Nigeria, including the Biafra War (the Nigerian Civil War from July 6, 1967 till January 15, 1970). During that time, the physician was born in a refugee hospital. He also shares his spirituality and the place it occupies in his life. The author discloses in his candid memoir the resilience and courage of his parents. We learn about the author's tribe, the Igbo, and he reveals the insecurities he had growing up (for instance, he internalized how his country perceived his tribe). Readers will also find a chapter where the specialist answers questions from parents regarding contact sports. The memoir contains different layers or facets. It can be perceived as a medical thriller (especially the part regarding the discovery of CTE with all the snags that occurred afterwards), a GPS or a blueprint for future physicians, or a source of wisdom and inspiration for people who are trying to improve their lives. Here are the moving words of sagacity (dear to the author) from his late father comprised in the book: "Look Bennet, I hope you're not getting all these for the purposes of self-aggrandizement or ego. That would be very dangerous. But if you're getting all this education so you can use your talent as equity to enhance the lives of other people, that would be beautiful". Morality is non-negotiable for Dr. Omalu. His actions demonstrate that he is a man who will not choose a higher status or prestige over fairness or justice. Dr. Omalu knows that he did not arrive at his current position by himself and that God was with him at every hurdle and victory. He did not forget where he came from and remains grateful to God. Dr. Omalu avers in his latest book that his Christian faith has been part of his entire life and has helped him surmount his struggles and vicissitudes. His religious beliefs helped him to triumph over many hurdles that life threw at him. The readers will discover in his memoir his pluck, determination and resourcefulness.

It is interesting to observe in his book that the physician does not shy away from sharing his emotions and baring his soul. The memoir makes readers laugh and cry. The physician shares in his book the doubts he had throughout his life journey. In addition, the author of course communicates his thoughts about the movie *Concussion*. The memoir is dedicated to his family.

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Moreover, Will Smith prefaced the book. Mark Tabb is the co-author of the autobiography. Dr. Omalu's two books are fascinating and page-turners. The author uses an accessible language that even twelve-year olds can understand. He expresses himself in his books not only as a physician but also as a concerned father about contact sports.

[Will Smith](#) (who could have went to [MIT](#) after high school) interpreted Dr. Omalu excellently in the movie [Concussion](#), in other words it was one of the best performances of his career. He received a Golden Globe nomination as best actor for the movie. Nonetheless, the actor deserved at least an Oscar nomination for playing Dr. Omalu. It is important to note that the

[Oscars](#)

have

[never](#)

given an award in the best-actor/actress category to an African-American scientist/physician not even to

[Sidney Poitier](#)

for

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

(he did not have an Oscar nomination for this role) nor for Black philanthropists in the same category. More recently, in 2016 it is widely known how the Oscars were criticized for their lack of

[diversity](#)

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Seul contre tous is the French name of the movie *Concussion*. It means *Alone Against All*. This title really evokes that it was a David versus Goliath battle. Dr. Omalu was courageous because he ended up alone against a system.

The Denver Post

wrote that Smith's performance was "sensitive [and] understated". The movie raised over \$48 million at the box office.

The pathologist has been featured on many platforms: *The New York Times*, *CNN*, *ESPN*, *ABC*, *GQ*, *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, *Time* magazine, etc. Last May, he was featured in Dublin's biggest newspaper, *The Irish Times*. He also wrote for the NY Times

https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/07/opinion/dont-let-kids-play-football.html?_r=0

in 2015. In addition, the physician is mentioned in the documentary

League of Denial: The NFL's Concussion Crisis

for PBS in 2013 and in the Broadway play "Headstrong" in 2012. The media reports that thanks to Dr. Omalu's discoveries since 2002, concussions and other traumatic brain injuries (TBIs)

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ensuing long term damage, in addition to short term damage, have gained much awareness. "It is now recognized that CTE is caused by head trauma. Like Mike Webster, Dr. Omalu declared that Terry Long's football career had triggered later brain damage and depression. The physician also discovered evidence of CTE in the brains of retired NFL athletes Justin Strzelczyk (who passed away in 2004 at the age of 36), Andre Waters (who died in 2006 at 44), and Tom McHale (who perished in 2008 at 45). The pathologist also examined the brain of NFL running back Damien Nash, who died in 2007 at 24. Furthermore, Dr. Omalu found CTE in the brains of military veterans, publishing the first documented case in a November 2011 article entitled: "Chronic traumatic encephalopathy in an Iraqi war veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder who committed suicide". The physician discovered evidence of CTE in a 27-year-old Iraq War veteran who had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and later killed himself. The media utters that Dr. Omalu's work states that PTSD is related to the CTE spectrum of diseases and needs greater study in the medical field. These issues gained the attention of the White House and last year former President Barack Obama announced a \$30 million project to study the risk of concussion in sport and its treatment. In addition, in May 2016, the commander in chief held the first White House summit on sports concussions, inviting officials, medical researchers, sportsmen and concerned parents. Dr. Omalu was invited to the White House as a speaker to share his expertise. The pathologist is recognized around the world. For instance, the Royal Colleges of Surgeons in Dublin awarded him an Honorary Doctorate in science last June. He also received in 2016 the Distinguished Service Award from the

[AMA](#)

(American Medical Association).

Dr. Omalu discovered abnormal proteins in Mike Webster's brain in 2002 via an independent and self-financed tissue analysis. The physician is a real life super-hero. Dr. Omalu spent \$100,000 of his own money to pay for the analysis that led to the well-known discovery. This demonstrates the depth of his philanthropy. Dr. Bennet Omalu was honored at the U.S. House of Representatives for his efforts to increase awareness of repetitive brain trauma in 2016. However, he also deserves the Presidential Medal of Freedom (the highest civilian honor in America) and/or the Congressional Gold Medal. He also merits a Nobel Prize in Medicine for his discovery. The physician is a man for whom it is important to maintain his personal, spiritual and professional integrity. He takes his Hippocratic Oath very seriously by honoring his ethical code. He was not willing to jeopardize his uprightness even if it meant a serious setback to his profession. Dr. Omalu is a physician with a conscience. He knew that the issue was bigger than him. It concerned the health of athletes, the well-being of their loved ones and the population as a whole. He deserves the key of at least one American city. The physician could be the next Surgeon General of his country.

Again, Dr. Omalu is another great example of the American dream and a concrete example of the American meritocracy. Dr. Omalu's path shows that it is possible to succeed regardless of your social class and so on. Once more, Dr. Omalu's story is about resilience, courage and triumph. He refused to accept the status quo. Hence, Dr. Omalu is not afraid of the system. The

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physician 'is not for sale'. It took bravery to jump into the void but it was more important for Dr. Omalu to keep his morality in spite of the aforesaid hurdles. In addition, better doors opened to him afterward.

The physician's Christian faith helped him to face many tribulations. Again, going to medical school is a full-time job in itself and the author also had to work at the same time to support himself. He managed to become one of the most trained physicians in the U.S. Currently, Dr. Bennet Omalu is the chief medical examiner of San Joaquin County, California, and an associate clinical professor of pathology at the University of California in Davis. Now, Dr. Omalu lives in California with his wife Prema Mutiso, a registered nurse and their two children. Mrs. Mutiso is originally from Kenya. Dr. Omalu became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 2015. His parents inspired Dr. Omalu to become the man that he is today. It is important to mention that his father was abandoned at the age of three and managed to become an engineer overseas. His parents were married for 56 years until his father's death in 2014. As mentioned, Dr. Omalu did not forget where he came from and his Catholic faith is dear to his heart.

Here is our exclusive interview with the pathologist: <http://megadiversities.com/entrevues/373-exclusive-interview-with-the-heart-and-soul-of-the-movie-concussion-the-pathologist-dr-omalu-md.html>