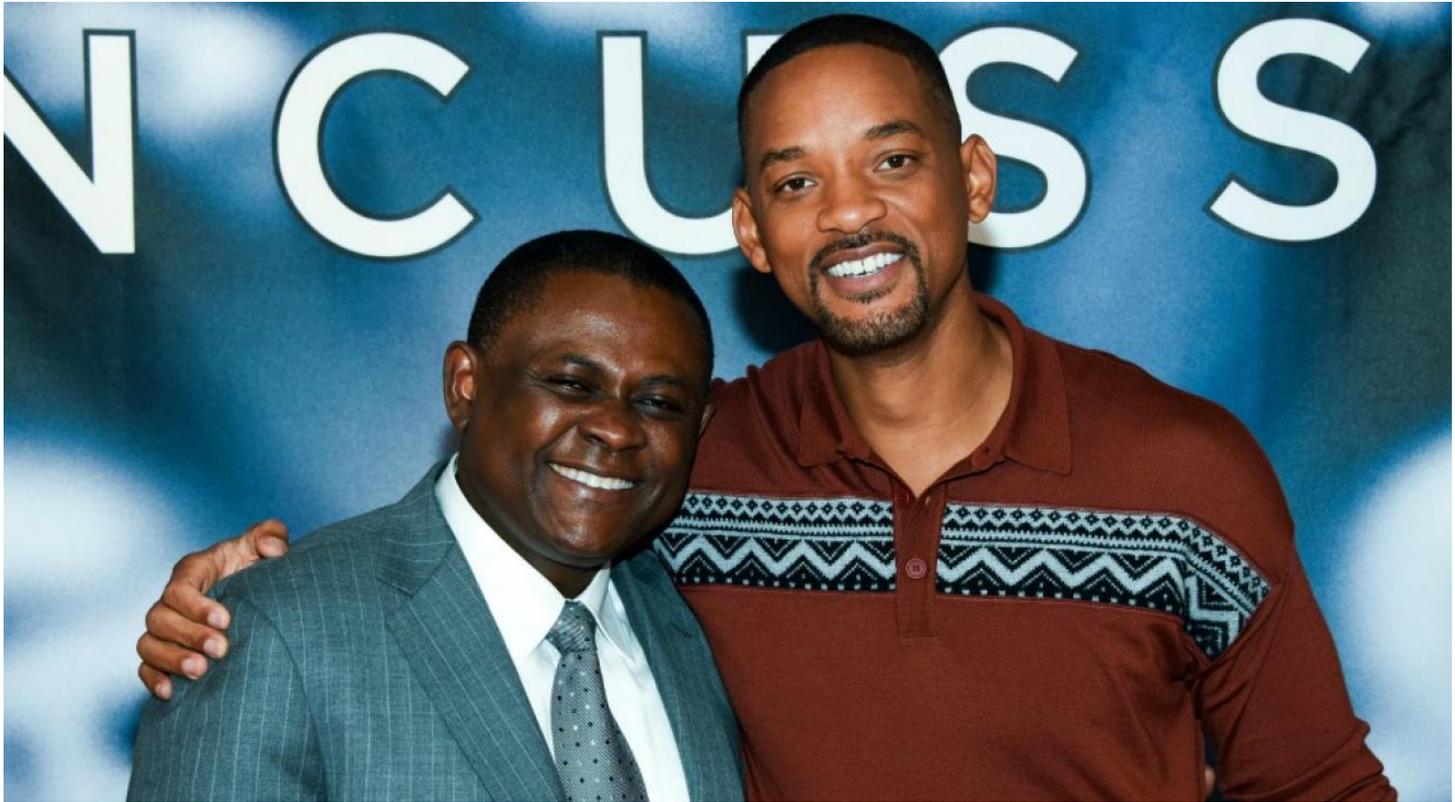


Exclusive interview with the heart and soul of the movie Concussion: Dr. Omalu M.D.

Written by Patricia Turner LL.M and LL.D Candidate in 2016
Wednesday, 02 August 2017 00:00



[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

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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 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

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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, 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

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to receive a \$765 million in a concussions lawsuit.

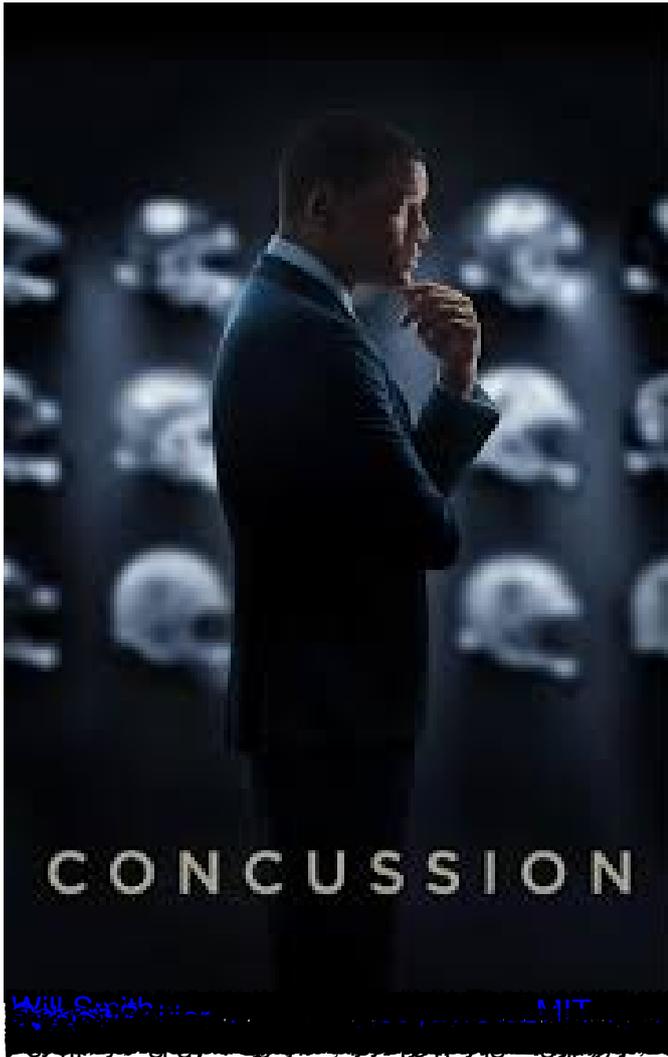
Again about Play Hard, Die Young, readers also learn in detail what happened to the late NFL player Terry Long. The athlete Andre Waters was another player who suffered from blows in the head. In the book, the public will find an excerpt of a loving and moving letter written by Andre Waters for his mom 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 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.

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