

UAMS News Bureau

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**Michael Birrer, M.D., Ph.D., Invested
in Kent C. Westbrook, M.D. Director’s Chair
for the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute**

LITTLE ROCK — Michael Birrer, M.D., Ph.D., vice chancellor and director of the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS), was invested July 15 in the Kent C. Westbrook, M.D. Director’s Chair for the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute.

“Michael Birrer’s scholarly corpus is incredibly impressive, and the ways he has found to improve cancer treatment have saved thousands and thousands of lives,” said UAMS Chancellor Cam Patterson, M.D., MBA, and CEO of UAMS Health. “I look forward to all that he will continue to do for our patients and to improve cancer care.”

Birrer was named vice chancellor and director of the Cancer Institute in 2019 and leads all cancer-related activities for UAMS, whose cancer clinics report more than 150,000 patient visits each year. There are about 150 UAMS faculty members engaged in cancer-related research and clinical activities. He was selected to lead the Cancer Institute toward achieving its goal of receiving National Cancer Institute Designation.

NCI Designation is awarded through a highly competitive assessment process during which cancer centers must demonstrate outstanding depth and breadth of high-quality cancer research. Receiving designation brings substantial benefits, including the ability to access federal research funding and offer clinical trials not available to non-designated centers. It also is expected to result in a \$72 million economic impact on Arkansas and create about 1,500 new jobs over five years.

“I was asked repeatedly why I would leave Harvard and go to the South and to UAMS,” Birrer said. “Every time, I smiled and simply said, ‘Because that’s where the need is.’”

“Think about the cancer needs in the state of Arkansas,” Birrer said. “The underserved, the economically disadvantaged, geographically isolated – many populations which desperately need state-of-the-art cancer care and access to high-level oncology. I can think of no better legacy than to bring an NCI-Designated cancer center to Arkansas.

That is why I am here. It's a truly sacred mission, it's God's work. I will never cease in the pursuit of it, ever."

An endowed chair is among the highest academic honors a university can bestow on a faculty member. A distinguished chair is established with gifts of at least \$1 million, which are invested and the interest proceeds used to support the educational, research and clinical activities of the chair holder. Those named to a chair are among the most highly regarded scientists, physicians and professors in their fields.

The chair, established with the help of a \$500,000 challenge gift, honors Kent C. Westbrook, M.D., the founding director of what is now the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, and a distinguished professor in the Department of Surgery in the UAMS College of Medicine. He received the college's Distinguished Faculty Award in 1978 and the Distinguished Faculty Service Award in 2013.

A native of Clarksville, Arkansas, Westbrook graduated first in his class from UAMS in 1965. Following his general surgery residency at UAMS, he completed a surgical oncology fellowship at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. He returned to Arkansas determined to establish a cancer program with friend and fellow cancer surgeon James Y. Suen, M.D., so Arkansans would not have to leave the state for treatment. Westbrook worked with colleagues throughout much of the 1970s and early 1980s to develop comprehensive cancer programs at UAMS, culminating in the 1984 formation of the Arkansas Cancer Research Center, the Cancer Institute's predecessor. Westbrook served as its founding director for 14 years.

"It is fitting that this chair is in the name of a person who shares these values of helping Arkansans: Kent Westbrook, someone who has contributed mightily to the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute. Thank you, Kent, for all of your efforts and everything you have done. If I see further, it's because I have stood on your shoulders."

"Dr. Birrer, I want to thank you for your outstanding leadership and hard work as we pursue NCI Designation for UAMS," said Susan Smyth, M.D., Ph.D., UAMS executive vice chancellor and dean of the College of Medicine. "This ceremony is an opportunity to reflect on the Cancer Institute's history and importantly the tremendous impact that Dr. Kent Westbrook has had at UAMS, and to express our gratitude to him for the visionary work that he and Dr. James Suen began many decades ago."

"I owe Mike much of my success in medicine because of his counsel, his mentorship and his collaborative efforts," said Don S. Dizon, M.D., professor of medicine at Brown University, director of women's cancers and hematology-oncology outpatient clinics at Lifespan Cancer Institute and director of medical oncology and the oncology sexual health program at Rhode Island Hospital, in a video recording. "I just want to say how proud I am to know you, and how proud I am that you ended up at such a wonderful institution, which I know you will help grow and develop."

"Mike stands as one of the most influential mentors that I've had the privilege of intersecting with, and I know that I would not be here today without his indefatigable support," said Marcela G. Del Carmen, M.D., MPH, professor of obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive biology at Harvard Medical School and chief medical officer for Massachusetts General Physicians Organization, in a video recording. "He has truly been a trailblazer in his commitment to women's health, to advancing the care of our patients with gynecological cancers and also importantly advancing the career of women in

medicine. I stand in front of you today recognizing that legacy and that commitment over the course of his entire career.”

In addition to the honor of being named chair holder, Birrer received a commemorative medallion and an inscribed wooden chair. He thanked his family and recognized Patterson, Christopher Cargile, M.D., director of the Behavioral Health Service Line and Steppe Mette, M.D., UAMS Medical Center CEO, for recruiting him to UAMS.

“I have been blessed my entire life, and now you have given me a way to complete my life mission,” Birrer said. “I thank you.”

Birrer studied at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in biology. He completed his medical degree and doctorate of philosophy in 1982 at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine’s Medical Scientist Training Program in New York. Following a medical internship and residency at Massachusetts General Hospital, Birrer entered the Medical Oncology Fellowship program at the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland. After his fellowship, Birrer was appointed senior investigator (with tenure) and established the molecular mechanism section in the Division of Cancer Prevention and Control.

In 2008, Birrer was appointed professor of medicine at the Harvard School of Medicine and assumed the position of director for both Gynecologic Medical Oncology at Massachusetts General Hospital and the Gynecologic Oncology Research Program at the Dana Farber/Harvard Cancer Center.

In 2017, he accepted the position of director of the O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, where he served as professor of medicine, pathology and OB-GYN.

Recognized nationally and internationally as an expert in gynecologic oncology, Birrer’s primary research interest is in characterizing the genomics of gynecologic cancers to improve the clinical management of these diseases. His clinical interests include ovarian cancer, endometrial cancer and cervical cancer.

Birrer has approximately 400 publications, including peer-reviewed manuscripts, book chapters and review articles. He served as chair and chair emeritus of the Department of Defense Ovarian Cancer Research Program, chair of the Committee for Experimental Medicine of the Gynecologic Oncology Group, chair of the Translational Science Working Group of the Gynecologic Cancer Intergroup, and a member of the Gynecologic Cancer Steering Committee.

UAMS is the state’s only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; hospital; a main campus in Little Rock; a Northwest Arkansas regional campus in Fayetteville; a statewide network of regional campuses; and seven institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, Psychiatric Research Institute, Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, Translational Research Institute and Institute for Digital Health & Innovation. UAMS includes UAMS Health, a statewide health system that encompasses all of UAMS’ clinical enterprise including its hospital, regional clinics and clinics it operates or staffs in cooperation with other providers. UAMS is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. *U.S. News & World Report* named UAMS Medical Center the state’s Best Hospital; ranked its ear, nose and throat program among the top

50 nationwide; and named six areas as high performing — COPD, colon cancer surgery, heart failure, hip replacement, knee replacement and lung cancer surgery. UAMS has 2,876 students, 898 medical residents and four dental residents. It is the state's largest public employer with more than 10,000 employees, including 1,200 physicians who provide care to patients at UAMS, its regional campuses, Arkansas Children's Hospital, the VA Medical Center and Baptist Health. Visit www.uams.edu or www.uamshealth.com. Find us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#) or [Instagram](#).

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