

National

**Dr. Levi Watkins, Johns Hopkins’
trailblazing Black doctor, dead at 70**

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Pioneering Black physician Dr. Levi Watkins Jr. (Courtesy Photo)

(NNPA)—Pioneering Black physician Dr. Levi Watkins Jr., whose invention of the automatic implantable defibrillator forever changed the world of cardiothoracic surgery, died April 11 at his “beloved” Johns Hopkins Hospital, where he spent the majority of his professional career. He was 70.

Watkins died Saturday morning after suffering a **massive heart attack** and stroke the night before, his brother Donald Watkins said in a statement posted on Facebook.

“Levi died at his beloved Johns Hopkins Hospital, where he saved thousands of patients as a world-renowned heart surgeon,” Donald Watkins wrote. “His spirit lives on in the three million patients worldwide whose hearts beat in a normal rhythm because of the implantable defibrillator he invented.”

Tributes poured in at the news regarding Baltimore's cherished adopted son.

"He was a great man, a committed doctor and a staunch supporter of the civil rights movement," Maryland Sen. Catherine Pugh, D-Baltimore, told the *AFRO*. She also said in a statement, "The world has suffered a great loss."

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake also expressed sorrow at the news. "Saddened to hear of the passing of renowned surgeon, pioneering activist, and respected leader Dr. Levi Watkins. He will be greatly missed," she said in a statement.

"R.I.P Dr Levi Watkinshe exemplified ebony excellence in medicine and manhood," wrote the Rev. Jamal Bryant, of Empowerment Temple in Baltimore.

Dr. Watkins was born June 13, 1944, in Parsons, Kansas, the third of six children; his father, Levi Watkins Sr., was a college professor who became president of Alabama State College in Montgomery, Ala.

The Kansas native was a trailblazer in many respects. After graduating with honors from Tennessee State in 1966, Watkins became the first African American to be admitted to and to graduate from Vanderbilt University's School of Medicine. And, after graduating from medical school, Dr. Watkins went onto become the first Black chief resident in cardiac surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital.

In 1980, he broke new medical ground when he performed the world's first human implantation of the automatic implantable defibrillator; he also developed the cardiac arrhythmia service at Johns Hopkins. Watkins would receive a Nobel Prize nomination for his innovation.

But his path to world renown was not without its challenges, his brother said. Racism and its attendant evils was a constant spectre, though he learned to push through.

"During the early years, White patients who needed a defibrillator would not allow Levi to operate on them. Later, they demanded that Levi be the one who performed this surgery. Today, cardiologists implant this device because the procedure is so routine," Donald Watkins said. "Now, every medical school around the world teaches heart surgery residents how to implant Levi's life-saving medical device. Three million people around the world are alive today because of Levi's determination to be a successful cardiac surgeon under the most difficult of circumstances."

Dr. Watkins' experiences fueled his determination to increase opportunities for African American and other minority students and doctors in the field. According to Johns Hopkins, largely due to his efforts, by 1983, minority representation at the school had increased by 400 percent. He also championed diversity nationally through his work on the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Harold Amos Medical Faculty Development Program, whose chief aim was diversity. And, according to his brother, he continued with those efforts up to the time of his death.

"Levi died on his feet giving a speech to medical student recruits at Hopkins, which was one of his passions. Levi made sure that the door of opportunity that cracked open for him at Hopkins would swing wide-open for all of the minority medical students and residents who followed him."

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