

# SOCIETY MEMBER PROFILE

**D**onna Arnett, Ph.D., M.S.P.H., was on her way to work as a clinical nurse at the beginning of her career when she had a stroke at age 27.

That was 20 years ago, when treatment options for stroke were much different than they are today. But Dr. Arnett was fortunate, she had no long-term paralysis, regained her speech and relearned the things she “lost.”

The stroke also influenced Dr. Arnett’s long and successful career.

“Often times when diseases occur at a young age, they can have a genetic origin,” she said. “So I got really interested in genetics after that, and ended up specializing in genetic epidemiology, which wasn’t even a field when I had my stroke.”

Today, Dr. Arnett is dean of the University of Kentucky College of Public Health. She also was the first epidemiologist to serve as president of the American Heart Association in 2012.

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In 2014, she received a \$500,000 grant from the American Heart Association to study the impact of high blood pressure on African-Americans’ hearts and kidneys. Research focused on genetics and its influence on diseases is a relatively new and innovative area of funding for the American Heart Association, and made possible with private gifts from donors, including Cor Vitae Society members.

“At this time, we’re on the cusp of truly revolutionizing the prevention and treatment of cardiovascular diseases and stroke,” Dr. Arnett said. “The area of precision medicine, which can use the genetic profile of an individual to better understand how drugs, treatment or diet could be targeted to lead to better health and cardiovascular options, is within our grasp.”

“We still have a lot of work to do to get us there. We have the technology in place, and now we need the money to study large groups of people to translate that knowledge into the critical practice.”

A shift in thinking about how to prevent these diseases and keep people alive through healthy lifestyles are just as important, Dr. Arnett said.

“I’ve spent my career in genetics, and I know that heart disease and stroke are 90 percent preventable by following health metrics and knowing your numbers,” she said. “If you’re able to maintain a normal blood pressure, body weight, eat healthy, don’t smoke, and keep your blood pressure and cholesterol numbers within a normal range, then you lessen your chances of having heart disease, stroke and even cancer.”

Dr. Arnett believes it will take more than education to promote the message of prevention.

“We have to realize that health is our only resource, and preserving health across a lifespan is best achieved by meeting people where they are so healthy options become the default options,” she said.

The American Heart Association, with its volunteers and partners, are working at local levels to build a culture of health, making it easy for people to make healthy choices where they live, work and play. It’s part of the 2020 Impact Goal to improve the cardiovascular health of all Americans by 20 percent while reducing deaths from cardiovascular diseases and stroke by 20 percent.

“We have to think about doing things like building physical activity into our days, designing our cities and workplaces to incentivize people to get to work by walking or biking,” Dr. Arnett said. “And that extends to healthy eating, making it easy for working parents to prepare meals who are racing to get out the door and get kids to school.” ■



*Donna Arnett, Ph.D., M.S.P.H.*