

Top Docs

*362 physicians in 38 specialties,
rated by their peers*

photos by Michael Mertz

Nine years ago, doctors informed Gregory White Smith that he had an inoperable malignant brain tumor and gave him, maybe, three months to live. How did he react? Like any rational person, the thirty-four-year-old went back to his hotel, plopped down in front of the TV and tried to eat every cinnamon bun the coffee shop could provide.

While tranquilizing himself on television, he heard a weatherman say, "Better break out those umbrellas tomorrow," and he realized his death sentence wasn't like an expiration date on a milk carton. The weatherman, like his doctors, was making a prediction based on his experience, not on immutable laws of nature. A writer by trade, Smith was in a habit of going anywhere, talking to anyone, reading anything — trying everything that would help him learn about his subject. Why not apply the same principles to his own life?

That's when the idea of *The Best Doctors in America* was born. He started contacting top doctors nationwide and asked them to name the best practitioners in their specialty. Every time a promising name turned up, he was on the phone or

a plane, or his X-ray scans went in his place: to Australia for an expert in vascular tumors; to Sweden for a radiosurgeon; to Israel for a neurosurgeon; plus dozens of domestic destinations, coast to coast. In New York, he found Dr. Sadek Hilal, a neuroradiologist who recommended embolization, a technique for shrinking vascular tumors, and went on to finish his biography of artist Jackson Pollock, which won a Pulitzer Prize. Five years later, he found the right surgeon for his "inoperable" tumor, Dr. Vinko Dolenc at the University of Virginia. A native of Slovenia, Dr. Dolenc had performed more operations in the region of the brain where Smith's tumor was located than any other surgeon in the world. He says his experience has convinced him that "miracles" in medicine always start with the right doctor.

Last year, *PHOENIX Magazine* did its own survey by polling a list provided by the Maricopa Board of Medical Examiners, asking each doctor to whom he or she would refer family members in numerous medical specialties. This year, we decided to work with Woodward/

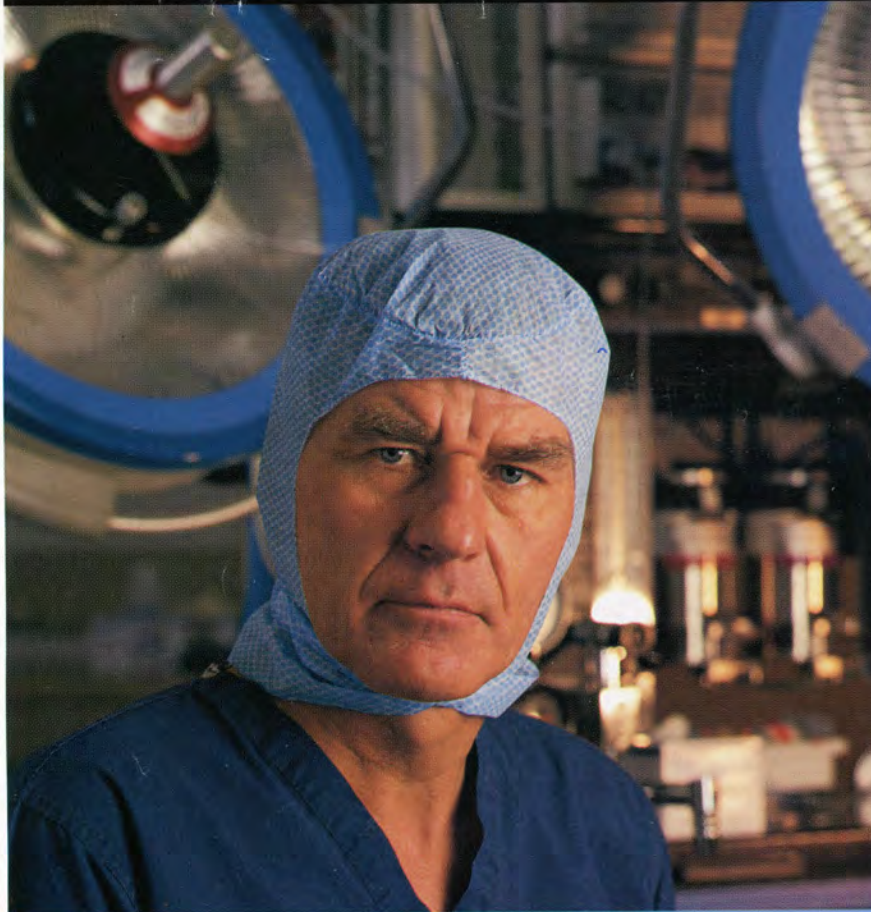
White, publishers of *The Best Doctors in America*, partly because they were surveying thousands of doctors for a Pacific region guide for the first time.

Like Woodward/White, *PHOENIX Magazine* is certainly not in the business of recommending medical care: this is simply a list of names other doctors mentioned when asked: "If you had a close friend or a loved one who needed a (neurological surgeon, for example), and you couldn't perform the operation yourself, for whatever reason, to whom would you refer them?"

Using their *Best Doctors in America 1994-1995* list, they asked doctors across the Pacific states to rate the clinical abilities of their peers by voting on other listed doctors in their area of expertise or to nominate other doctors. They also were asked to nominate and vote on doctors in the region who have extraordinary clinical expertise, but who may not have attracted national attention because they do not engage in research or publish as much as other doctors in the field.

The doctors we singled out for interviews were recommended by Woodward/White for various reasons. Here are the local results of their poll:

These lists are adapted from *The Best Doctors in America®: Pacific Region, 1996-1997*, which includes 4,815 doctors in virtually every major medical specialty. *The Best Doctors in America®: Pacific Region* is published by Woodward/White, Inc., of Aiken, South Carolina, and can be ordered directly from the publisher by phone (803-648-0300) or by mail (129 First Avenue SW, Aiken, SC 29801). For a fee, Woodward/White also undertakes specialized searches for doctors. For more information, contact the firm directly by phone, mail, e-mail (woodward.white@groupz.net) or through the World Wide Web at <http://www.bestdoctors.com>.



Dr. Volker Sonntag

Neurological Surgery

It happened just as Volker Sonntag's family glimpsed a faint light glimmering at the end of the tunnel.

They had already survived so much.

Sonntag's father survived his service in the German Army through World War II, in part because he was a dentist and so worked well behind the front lines.

The whole family had survived the stint in the American relocation camp after Germany collapsed in flames and the Allies took over.

And they survived five years of painful reconstruction, his father struggling to reestablish his shattered dental practice.

But after enduring a decade of tragedy and turmoil, a normal life seemed, finally, again within reach.

That's when Volker Sonntag's father developed an abscess in his brain. It disabled him, made it impossible to practice dentistry, and altered his personality. The confident, domineering man became quiet and withdrawn.

It should have been the final blow for the struggling family.

But Sonntag's mother stepped into the void, found sponsors in the United States of America, and in an astonishing act of faith and courage, moved her battered family to Phoenix in 1957. None of them knew a word of English.

"It was the land of opportunity," says Sonntag, a neurosurgeon at the internationally respected Barrow Neurological Institute based at St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix and one of the most respected doctors in the area, according to *Best Doctors in America: Pacific Region*.

His mother enrolled Volker and his two brothers in school immediately, where they sat mutely in the back for the first semester, not understanding a word. They did learn the word "Nazi" on the playground, but were generally amazed by the warmth and sincerity of their welcome.

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Stephen P. Beals * (Craniofacial Surgery, Facial Aesthetic

Dr. Sonntag continued

"The German character is very much turned inward. The American people opened up with very generous, open arms," says Sonntag, who has performed some of the most innovative, high-risk, high-visibility spinal surgeries in the country. He made headlines in Phoenix several years ago as part of a Barrow team which used a specially crafted rod to reattach a young boy's skull to his spine. Surgeons across the nation have since used that technique, including in the treatment of actor Christopher Reeve, who suffered spinal damage last year in a horse-riding accident.

At age eleven, Sonntag set to work emptying trash cans in a trailer park, earning thirty-seven cents an hour. He's collected millions in surgical fees since then, but he recalls that first \$4.50 paycheck with special satisfaction. "I'll never forget it," he says quietly.

By the end of his first summer, Sonntag could function adequately in English. That's when he began to excel. He devoured the sciences, graduated in the top of his class from Arizona State University with a degree in chemistry, and was president of the first graduating class at the University of Arizona medical school. He did his residency at Tufts University and completed his neurosurgical residency at the New England Medical Center in 1977, determined to be a surgeon and drawn by the profound mysteries of the brain.

"It was the black box puzzle: The patient can't move his right arm: Why? I had the surgeon mentality — want to solve things with my hands. And I loved the thinking part of neurosurgery."

Along the way, he married Lynne, a nurse practitioner he met at the UofA. Now fifty-one, Sonntag speaks with special pride of his three children, ages seventeen, fifteen and five. The whole family, except the five-year-old, regularly runs in ten-kilometer races. He also takes special pleasure in his weekend puttering around the back yard — when he's not globe-trotting from one medical conference to another.

He's vice chairman of the Barrow Department of Neurosurgery, chairman of the Barrow Spine Section, director of the institute's residency program, a professor of clinical surgery at the University of Arizona, and a prolific surgeon, researcher and writer of scientific papers. His list of publications, appointments, guest lectures and activities goes on for seventy pages.

But it's still the small miracle of brain surgery that fascinates him.

"The thing that keeps driving me is that moment the patient wakes up in the recovery room, and now he can move his arms and legs," he says.

Sonntag and his Barrow colleagues continue to make important contributions to the art and science of neurosurgery. In one groundbreaking piece of research they discovered that high doses of steroids could reduce by up to fifty-nine percent a mysterious phenomenon called "secondary injury" — a chemical cascade that adds to initial damage to the spinal cord. The Barrow researchers now seek more potent chemicals that mimic the effect of the steroids without the side effects.

But despite his surgical reputation, his triumph over the odds, and his outward success — Sonntag says medicine is about humility, hard work and respect for the unanswered question — not ego.

"I've never understood the idea of the swashbuckling surgeon riding on a white horse. Why can't a good surgeon be a nice guy? Why wouldn't that be possible?"

"I got here through hard work and good luck — being at the right place at the right time, a good family and good friends." — Peter Aleshire

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Dr. Michael O'Meara

C a r d i o v a s c u l a r D i s e a s e

Her odds were not good.

She was a soft-spoken, charming, Hispanic woman, just shy of fifty, at the center of a loving family. She had just ignored the first heart attack, sitting until the pain passed, catching her breath, then going on about her business. But the second heart attack forced her to go to the hospital, although she had only limited medical insurance.

That's where cardiologist Michael O'Meara became her doctor. Fortunately for her, she was now in the hands of a diffident man whose colleagues in the recent national survey, Best Doctors in America: Pacific Region, identified him as one of the best cardiologists in the area.

"The first time I met her she was in the intensive care unit in really dire shape," O'Meara recalls. "We pulled her through and got her stable to the point where it was obvious that simple heart surgery was not going to help her. The initial response from the insurance companies was that she wasn't a candidate for transplant because it wasn't covered."

Perhaps another doctor would have recognized the futility of the situation, and prepared the family for the worst. But O'Meara spent nine months badgering the insurance company, and trying every technique in his commodious bag of tricks to keep his patient alive long

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