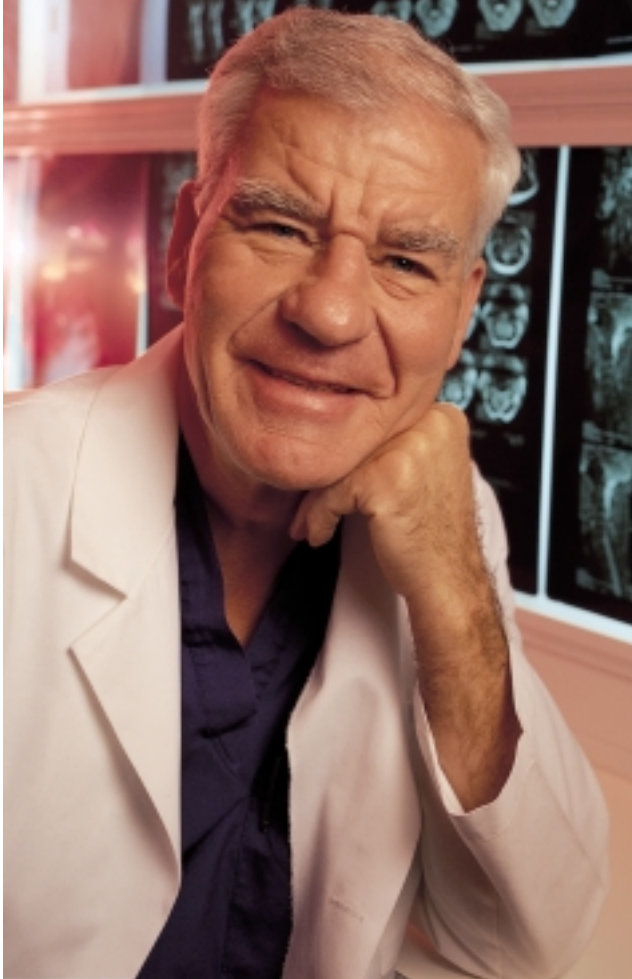


VOLKER SONNTAG



“He delicately balances inspiring research and the best in patient care with excellence in teaching and serving as a role model to our young neurosurgeons,” says Dr. Spetzler. “Yet he still finds the time to follow his passion as a soccer coach for his young son, Stephen.”

Each year, the Congress of Neurological Surgeons chooses an honored guest based purely on academic productivity. Barrow is believed to be the only center in the country with two surgeons who’ve received this honor. (Dr. Spetzler received the honor in 1994.)

A graduate of Central High School and Arizona State University (*summa cum laude*), Dr. Sonntag earned his medical degree at the University of Arizona where he decided that surgery was the best fit for his high-

In September, Dr. Volker Sonntag will receive neurosurgery’s most coveted honor — Honored Guest of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons.

When Volker Sonntag immigrated with his family from Germany to Phoenix in 1957, the 12-year-old boy was amazed to find that oranges grow on trees.

Never one to waste time, he jumped feet first into his new life, quickly getting a job at the trailer court where they lived and going to school.

He learned to speak English by watching the Mickey Mouse Club on TV.

This September, Dr. Sonntag will receive neurosurgery’s most highly coveted honor when he is recognized as the Honored Guest of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons, the largest neurosurgery organization in the country.

Dr. Sonntag is modest about his accomplishments. “I’m just a hard worker. I have to work hard to learn things.”

Robert Spetzler, M. D., the director of Barrow, has loftier views on his accomplishments.

energy, results-oriented personality. He served as president of his graduating class and then completed his internship there in 1972.

After medical school, he went to Tufts-New England Medical Center Hospital for his residency.

“I had an old two-seater Mercedes and all my belongings fit in it. So I drove back to Boston and spent five years there,” he says.

Dr. Sonntag practiced medicine for nine months in Ohio before he and his wife, Lynne, decided to move back to Arizona. In 1978, he set up a private neurosurgery practice in Phoenix. Five years later, Dr. Sonntag, Dr. Spetzler and a number of other neurosurgeons established a group practice, Barrow Neurological Associates, at Barrow Neurological Institute.

Today, Dr. Sonntag serves as the vice-chairman of the Division of Neurological Surgery, the chairman of the Spine Section, the director of the Spine Fellowship Program and the director of the Residency Program.



His dedication to teaching has earned him many awards, including seven Barrow Teacher of the Year Awards, the Barrow Mentor of the Millennium, and Honored Guest for Lifetime Leadership and Mentoring to Young Neurosurgeons from the American Association of Neurological Surgeons.

“I enjoy teaching, the give and take between the fellows, the residents and myself,” Dr. Sonntag says. “I prefer teaching by example rather than brow beating. If I ask a resident a question, and he doesn’t know the answer, there’s no reason for me to embarrass him in front of his peers.”

Dr. Sonntag has also contributed much to our understanding of spinal disorders, especially cervical spine disorders. He has written more than 60 textbook chapters and more than 200 journal articles, co-edited four major textbooks, and made more than 600 presentations around the world. He is a member of many professional organizations and has served in numerous leadership roles.

Dr. Sonntag arrives at Barrow around 7 a.m. every workday. He’s home nearly every day by 6:30 p.m. The evenings and weekends are for family activities, early-morning runs with friends and volleyball games with residents.

This emphasis on maintaining balance and making time for family is an important lesson for young neurosurgeons, says Dr. Sonntag. He believes his biggest accomplishment is being married 28 years and having three children (Alissa,

Christopher and Stephen) while also being a neurosurgeon.

Neurosurgery offers big highs and big lows. “When you have a successful surgery, when you actually think you’ve helped a patient, that’s a really rewarding feeling.” But, when a case doesn’t go as expected and a patient does poorly, sleep is impossible, Dr. Sonntag says.

Much has changed in the world of neurosurgery and at Barrow since Dr. Sonntag joined Barrow in 1983.

Friends and Colleagues



Volker Sonntag, M.D.

Born Nov. 23, 1944, in Germany
A middle child
Married Lynne, a nurse, in 1974
Completed medical training in 1977
Moved from Ohio to Arizona in 1978
Honored Guest of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons, 2002



Robert Spetzler, M.D.

Born Nov. 13, 1944, in Germany
A middle child
Married Nancy, a nurse, in 1974
Completed medical training in 1977
Moved from Ohio to Arizona in 1983
Honored Guest of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons, 1994



Then, there were only a few CTs in the whole country. Instead of using plates and screws to stabilize spine fractures, neurosurgeons relied on neck halos and bed rest. Barrow

saw 800 patients a year at that time.

Today, Barrow handles more than 4,000 cases a year, and technology has revolutionized spine surgery. In the future, Dr. Sonntag

expects to see more robotic driven surgery, smaller incisions and more use of endoscopes.

He is proud of the reputation Barrow has built as a place with a full roster of specialists, each outstanding and respected in his or her individual field.

And his colleagues and friends are very proud of what Dr. Sonntag brings to Barrow.

“He always gives his best to his patients, his residents, fellows and his family,” Dr. Spetzler says. “There is not a single false fiber in his body.”

Supporting Barrow

Residents, Fellows and Donors Honor Dr. Sonntag

Through the years, many people have influenced and mentored Stephen Papadopoulos, M. D., – the elementary teacher who encouraged his love of learning, the high school teacher who first interested him in biology, the physician who influenced him to consider neurosurgery.

“Of all those people, Volker [Sonntag] has been the most influential and perhaps the person I prefer to emulate,” says Dr. Papadopoulos, who completed a spine fellowship at Barrow in 1989 and now practices here.

So, when Dr. Papadopoulos learned that an endowed chair was being established in honor of Dr. Sonntag, he contributed toward that effort – as did many other neurosurgeons and patients touched by Dr. Sonntag through the years.

“There has been an absolutely enthusiastic response to the idea of creating this chair,” says

Robert Spetzler, M. D., director of Barrow and a long-time friend of Dr. Sonntag.

The Alumni Spine Chair has been established to honor Dr. Sonntag’s many contributions to Barrow and the field of spine surgery. When Dr. Sonntag retires, it will be renamed the Volker Sonntag Alumni Spine Chair.

Endowed chairs enable nationally recognized physicians and scientists, such as Dr. Sonntag, to pursue research and run laboratories, thus insuring continuous scientific contributions within a specialty area.

“He has published an enormous amount of research, which has had a big impact on how spine patients are taken care of,” says Dr. Spetzler.

Nearly one million of the \$1.5 million needed has been pledged to the Alumni Spine Chair. If you would like to help complete funding of this endowed chair, please contact Alan Knobloch, vice president of Barrow Neurological Foundation, at 602-406-1037.