

Neurosurgeon felt pride, anxiety at being selected

By Jodie Snyder
Staff writer

It was a medical consultation unlike Dr. Volker Sonntag had ever participated in.

In October 1994, Sonntag was speaking in Cartagena, Colombia, when he got an emergency call from France. Could he come to Paris to consult on the illness of the wife of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia?

Sonntag, vice chairman of neurological surgery at Barrow Neurological Institute of St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center, demurred, but the royal family was insistent.

On a Friday, the day after he finished in Cartagena, Sonntag flew to Paris.

A limousine took him to the family's palace, where he found himself auditioning with four other internationally known neurosurgeons or orthopedists.

"We were known as the Final Five," Sonntag said, laughing.

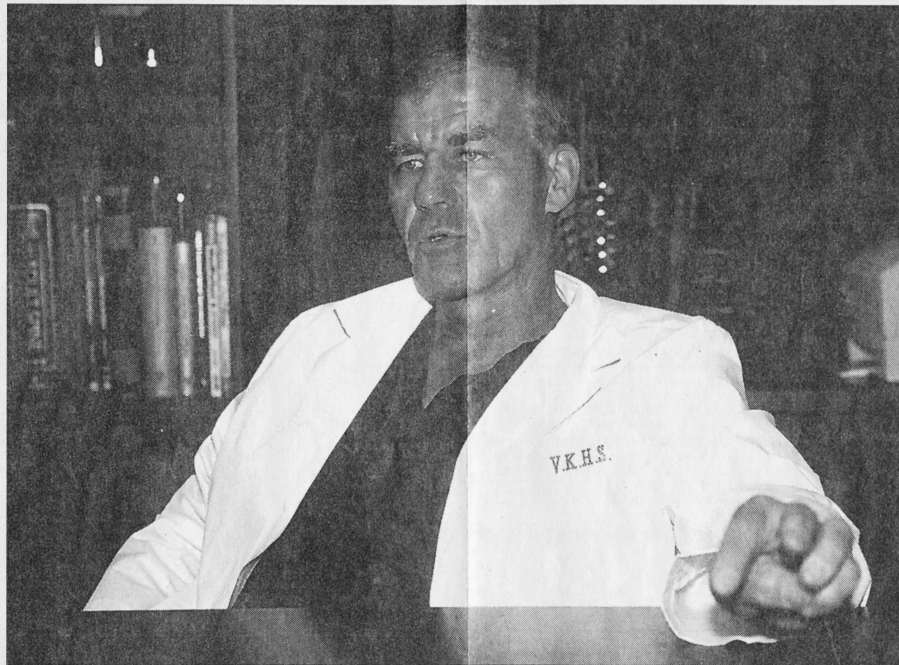
At 68 years old, the first wife of the king of Saudi Arabia nearly had become a quadriplegic because of general health problems and a spinal cord that had been damaged in an accident. Her body was stiff, and it took two or three people to get her out of a chair.

The five physicians were shown the matriarch's medical records and made their medical

recommendations. The Saudis conferred and returned to tell the doctors they all could leave. As Sonntag got to the door, they said, "Except for you, Dr. Sonntag."

Sonntag's emotions were divided between pride at his selection and nervousness at what lay ahead.

He offered to do the surgery in two weeks. Sooner, the Saudis said. They decided she would fly to Phoenix for tests the next Monday



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Charles Krejcsi/Staff photographer

and undergo surgery Wednesday.

Because her spinal cord was so severely damaged, the royal family worried about her traveling. Any sudden jerks or bounces during the flight could cause her to stop breathing. Barrow sent an anesthesiologist and a neurological fellow to Paris to accompany her to Phoenix.

During the five-hour surgery, Sonntag removed four compacted cervical discs. Then he took bone from her left hip and fashioned it

into discs. He adhered a plate to the discs to stabilize the spinal column. It was a procedure Sonntag had done hundreds of times, but a misstep could have paralyzed his royal charge.

The king's wife responded well, and after almost four weeks, she was ready to leave the hospital. But an MRI of her head and neck showed that the plate had moved and that her bones were not knitting.

She had to undergo a second surgery and wear a "halo," a

corrective head piece to help keep the neck straight.

But first, Sonntag had to convince her that the odd-looking halo was necessary and that it would not affect her dignity.

Again, she recovered quickly. But her discharge was delayed again after her abdomen swelled.

Gastroenterologists were flown in. Then, her liver started failing, and liver specialists were called in. A third surgery, on her abdomen, was performed.

"She had been a very sick woman," Sonntag said. "Three operations were just too much. They (the Saudis) started having some doubts about me, and I would have done the same, I believe."

Yes, he acknowledged, the Saudis were demanding, but Sonntag believes it was driven by family ties rather than royal stature.

"It was their mother. Of course, they are going to have questions," he said.

Four months after she checked in, the king's wife left the hospital and entered a rented home in Paradise Valley.

Her Saudi physicians stayed with her throughout her time in Phoenix, and Sonntag made daily house calls.

During her convalescence, the king's wife had "hiccups," small setbacks in her recovery, such as loss of appetite or fatigue.

But for the most part, Sonntag said, she had a quiet recovery.

"She would sit there with her kaffeeklatsch in the parlor, playing cards and talking with her friends," he said.

On days when her eldest son, Prince Faisal, failed to call from Saudi Arabia, she would become depressed.

"Like any typical 70-year-old mother," Sonntag said.

Two days before she and the entourage left for Los Angeles, Sonntag examined her and found that she was able to walk with a walker and could move her arms fairly well.

Since then, he has heard a couple of times from his blue-blood patient, and apparently the move to California has sped her recovery.

"I think the change of pace did her well," the surgeon said. "It's no good staying in one place too long."