



Volker K. H. Sonntag, MD
Barrow Neurological Institute,
Phoenix, AZ

FROM THE DESK OF THE PRESIDENT

Mr. Reynolds

As physicians we serve a fundamental role in our society and often exert considerable influence on the lives of our patients. We work a lot and we work hard. Our work ethic begins in residency and becomes a habitual mode of operation after our training is completed. In a survey study conducted by the American Association of Neurological Surgeons (AANS) in 1995, 75% of neurosurgeons worked 46 or more hours/week and 57% worked 56 or more hours/week. In fact, 15% stated that they worked 76 or more hours/week.

Individuals who want to become physicians must desire to serve patients, be self-motivated, and be able to survive the pressures and long hours of medical education and practice. Physicians must be willing to study throughout their careers to stay current with medical advances. Spine physicians especially are constantly exposed to new technology, imaging techniques and biochemical and bioengineering advances. What makes us want to continue our education on an ongoing basis? What makes us persevere through 6 to 8 years of residency, the process of board certification and eventually the process of board recertification?

This commitment to continuing education is demanding not only on individual physicians but also on their spouse, children, friends and relatives. Besides the physical, emotional and educational challenges, a physician's training is costly. And while the cost of a medical education has

increased, student financial assistance has not kept pace accordingly. More than 80% of medical students borrow money to cover their expenses. Once established, most physicians no doubt do well financially. This statement is not to claim that the difficult road to obtaining a doctorate in medicine and subspecialty certification is not worth the time, money and effort invested but rather to emphasize that physicians do indeed work long and hard.

Where does that drive come from? What makes us tick? Most likely, it reflects a combination of influences. Family, especially our parents, guide us — particularly in our early formative years. Teachers and coaches also influence us greatly in terms of our study habits, work habits, and whether we think inside or outside the box. Of course, the drive and determination to improve must also come from within ourselves. I was fortunate to have had loving, caring parents, good coaches and, for the most part, superb teachers. However, early in my life Mr. Reynolds also influenced the development of my work ethic.

When I was 12-years-old and had just immigrated from Germany with my family, I mowed lawns and did odd jobs in a trailer resort in Phoenix to earn money. One day while cutting grass, a lady stopped at that particular home to deliver eggs. We started talking and she told me that she and her husband owned and operated a chicken farm and were looking for extra help. The next week I was working on that chicken farm which consisted of seven large houses

divided into four pens. The chickens ran freely within these pens. We took care of about 10,000 chickens.

All farm work is hard and so it was on the chicken farm. Mr. Reynolds worked, literally, from dawn to dusk every day, every week. The work consisted of feeding the chickens, cleaning the pens, cleaning the water troughs, candling the eggs, packing the eggs, getting the pens ready for winter, getting the pens ready for summer, getting the pens ready for the new chicks, vaccinating the chickens and gathering the eggs. The work was endless and Mr. Reynolds worked and worked and worked. Never making a derogatory statement, never making an excuse, he worked.

After school I worked 1 to 2 hours each day, helping with the feeding and with cleaning the water troughs. After 6 months, he had enough confidence in me that he went north to build a new farm during the summer and left me with most of the duties. I learned about the value of work — that it is an end in itself — and I learned it from Mr. Reynolds.

As physicians we all work very hard and are rewarded by a smiling patient, a resident who successfully performs an operation and yes, a prosperous lifestyle. But we should remember that many other jobs also require diligence and hard work. Many individuals outside medicine also work extremely hard for long hours and likely receive fewer rewards than we do. Mr. Reynolds worked hard and enjoyed it. I want to thank him for the important lessons he taught me.