A Far-reaching and Innovative Career – A Sit Down with Inventor, Educator, and Cardiology Expert: Richard Heuser, MD

This month, as Round-up focuses on physician employment in Arizona, we took the opportunity to sit down with Richard Heuser, MD, to discuss his extensive experience and perspective.
A Celebrated Career

Dr. Heuser remembers being attracted to the idea of a career in medicine at a young age.

“Like most young men of my generation, watching Ben Casey and Dr. Kildare, it appeared that this was a very prestigious profession,” he said.

While Heuser’s introduction to the idea of medicine may seem fairly run-of-the-mill, his career certainly tells another story. An internationally recognized expert in cardiovascular care, Heuser has published hundreds of medical articles, developed ground-breaking treatments, and served on many societies and editorial boards.

His medical journey began at the University of Wisconsin, where he completed his medical degree. After graduating, he travelled to Baltimore, Maryland and completed his residencies in general practice and internal medicine at Johns Hopkins Hospital, where he would select the specialty that would shape his noteworthy career.

“At Hopkins, I was exposed to the top cardiology researchers worldwide, so I naturally pursued cardiology as a specialty,” he said. And he hasn’t looked back.

Heuser first moved to Arizona when he was recruited by Dr. Ted Dietrich to become the new Director of Research and Education at the Arizona Heart Institute. Following his time there, he decided he wanted to take up his own practice, and began working at the Phoenix Heart Center in 1997.

“I wanted to teach fellows as well as perform basic and clinical research in a true center of excellence,” he said.

“We are privileged to treat patients from not only Arizona, but around the world with cardiovascular techniques and devices that we have introduced to the State and in many cases to the world at our center. We see many patients that have had no other options, and we have been able to successfully manage their cardiovascular problems.”

In addition to his practice at the Phoenix Heart Center, Heuser currently serves as the chief of cardiology at St. Luke’s Medical Center, where he has pioneered many innovative treatments and technologies.

In addition to medical practice, research, and invention, Heuser also plays his part in education, serving as the professor of medicine at the University of Arizona College of Medicine, as well as working with other universities to promote progress.
“I am passionate about clinical research as well as the development of medical technology. I have worked with the state and both University of Arizona and Arizona State University to develop programs to train others in developing new technology,” he said.

In addition to his hard work as a cardiovascular specialist on all fronts, Heuser devotes a considerable amount of time to his family and home life. He and his wife, Shari, have one daughter, Alexandra, and one grandchild, Anastasia.

Balance is important to any healthy lifestyle, and he and Shari, along with their two dogs, enjoy staying active together by hiking, running, and cross training. Heuser still competes in distance races, where he represents very well in his age group.

“I have a great spouse,” Heuser said. “So I only have to worry about work.”

**Battling a Physician Shortage**

Thanks to the breadth and variety of his career, Heuser has gained a fair amount of perspective on the physician employment landscape in Arizona. And even though that scene certainly looks a little different than it did when he was first starting out, he believes there is plenty of hope for these looking to make their own mark on the field.

“I think people are still moving here, and I think a skilled physician will also have opportunities in Arizona,” he said. “For a well trained physician with unique skills, there is always an opportunity.”

These opportunities, however, will certainly not come without a fair amount of work, and perhaps even a little hustle. There is plenty of competition.

“I think physicians who bring nothing unique to a practice or community are going to have to sell themselves to consumers as well as referring doctors. This is no different than any other business.”

That competitive market results partly from Arizona’s known physician shortage. There are, of course, many different factors affecting this shortage, and contributing to Arizona’s difficulty in attracting physicians and enticing them to stay. Heuser has a few ideas about the causes, and potential solutions, of the shortage.

“The problem in our state is that we need more advanced training programs for residents and fellows, particularly in Phoenix,” he said. “Most people stay in the city where they do their advanced training.”

“The limited resident and fellowship positions make it imperative to continue to develop the University of Arizona College of Medicine – Phoenix. With so many of Arizona’s medical students leaving the state for their advanced training, we produce far more medical professionals than we get to keep. A more robust educational scene, as well as some new ideas, could help tip that balance,” said Heuser.

“I am passionate about helping Phoenix to become a true university town,” he said.

“I have been fortunate to live in other parts of the country where there were a myriad of national and world experts in various fields of medicine. We have not achieved this yet in Phoenix. I would like to be part of the solution to this one thing lacking in this vibrant city and state. One of the things that would make the University of Arizona College of Medicine – Phoenix unique would be to develop an innovation center.”

“I have been intimately involved with BioInspire in Peoria and have helped develop two companies from scratch in these organizations. One of the ways to keep top physicians and scientists in this State would be to expand programs to allow academic physicians to develop proprietary technology in a true, private, public environment,” he said.

Another, perhaps unexpected, possibility to better the physician employment scene could come from the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The ACA seems to have an impact on every corner of the medical practice. While the program is not without its faults and frustrations, widespread participation could expand Arizona’s patient-base.

“If we truly will have more patients in the program, this could result in more physician employment opportunities,” Heuser said.
However, despite the various potential benefits, Heuser believes the ACA is a sign of a negative turn in the direction of the medical practice: one where medical providers are no longer calling the shots on what should be their areas of expertise.

**Shaping Change**

The Affordable Care Act is just one example of how politics is shaping the medical scene, and the physician voice is needed now more than ever.

"I think it is laudatory to develop a catastrophic healthcare insurance program available to all US citizens," Heuser said. "If all of us are paying the bills, in order to cover all citizens, of course there would be limitations."

"This could have been developed with medical leaders as well as insurance carriers and some government oversight. I am afraid the ACA was a program set up for strictly political reasons and has little to do with healthcare. However, there is no way that anybody suffering a catastrophic illness in the United States should go bankrupt because they cannot pay their medical bills."

"I really wish the politicians would have involved healthcare workers rather than pollsters when they set up a national health system program."

With so many politically driven regulations, Heuser is afraid the resulting medical culture could be standing in the way of the best medical care possible.
“With the regulatory environment in the United States, it is very difficult to treat many patients that I could treat with technology and techniques that I utilize in other countries,” he said.

“Twenty years ago when I had a patient who had a medical problem, I could document that either the technique or device I used was the best to be utilized. In my opinion, that is no longer possible because of the regulatory environment in American medicine.”

With so many reasons for physicians to start speaking up and being heard, it is little wonder that Heuser is so heavily involved with multiple medical organizations.

“I was fortunate to be involved with the American Heart Association (AHA) and the American College of Cardiology (ACC), nationally representing Arizona and presenting papers on topics and devices developed in Arizona,” Heuser said.

He has also been on the Board of AHA, Arizona, and is a former State President of the AHA.

“I am also very involved with the European Society of Cardiology and am one of the few Americans who lecture at various international meetings to try to disseminate technology that we have developed or invented in Arizona,” he said.

Heuser has also lectured and demonstrated techniques around the world for treatment of Chronic Total Occlusion (CTO) and is a member of the CTO Club. He previously co-directed the club’s meeting in Washington, D.C., where physicians from around the globe participated in discussions of the treatment technique, which has been referred to as the “final frontier” of coronary artery disease treatment.

Closer to home, Heuser has been a member of the Maricopa County Medical Society since 1994, and serves as the program director of the 3rd Annual Symposium Cardiovascular Disease Management: A Case-Based Approach. The event will be held October 1-3, 2015, in Phoenix. More details can be found on page 2.