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M.D. NEWS

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Dr. Florence Barnett
Neurosurgeon

A Long and Arduous Climb

A Longer Road than Most Medical Students

Dr. Florence Barnett Follows Her Father into Neurosurgery

By Helen K. Kelley

The path to becoming a neurosurgeon was not a direct line for Florence Barnett, M.D. She'd grown up watching her father put in long hours as a neurosurgeon and knew first-hand of the challenges of that particular field.

As a young college student, she chose to pursue a degree in Art History at Fleming College in Florence, Italy. Afterward she returned to the U.S., where she met her future husband, married and had two children. It was only after her subsequent divorce that she contemplated following in her father's footsteps.

"I knew I would have a much longer road than many medical students because I was basically starting over," acknowledges Barnett. "I was given credit for only one course from my bachelor's in Art History when I began the program to earn a science degree. It took six years to earn it."



PHOTO BY LELAND HOLDER

North Fulton Regional Hospital's Neurosciences Center has a complete continuum of care for patients who require neurosurgery.



Dr. Florence Barnett and R.N. Katja Guenther review a patient's head CTs.

PHOTO BY LELAND HOLDER

Barnett received her bachelor's degree in Biology from Kennesaw College, then went straight through four years of medical school at Medical College of Georgia, where she earned Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society's award, as well as an award for excellence in neurosurgery. The next step was to gain admission to a residency program, a process that's highly competitive. It was there that her head pressed against the proverbial glass ceiling.

"I knew what I was getting into by going into neurosurgery. I'd watched my father in his career, and even worked in his office for a short period of time, so I understood how grueling this would be," Barnett explains. "But no one wanted to take a divorced mother of two into a residency program—I wasn't a safe bet for finishing the course."

Barnett had to apply for a residency three times before gaining acceptance to Medical College of Georgia's neurosurgery program. She refused to become discouraged and put her time to good use between applications, working for two years in general and trauma surgery at Carraway Methodist Medical Center

Rehabilitation Unit is an Important Part of NFRH's Neurosciences Center

North Fulton Regional Hospital's neurosciences center has a complete continuum of care for patients who require neurosurgery, including a dedicated intensive care unit, a surgical floor for intermediate care, and a rehabilitation unit for those who need further recovery before going home.

NFRH's 33-bed inpatient acute rehab unit provides a full range of services, including:

- 24-hour availability of a physiatrist
- physical therapy
- occupational therapy
- speech therapy
- counseling

Typically, patients who come to the rehab unit have experienced strokes, traumatic brain injuries, spinal cord injuries, brain tumors, neurological diseases such as Multiple Sclerosis, or other brain injuries. The unit also cares for patients with complicated orthopedic injuries, as well as those who have undergone certain surgeries. In addition, a small percentage of patients who are generally medically debilitated and have functional needs, but also have a reasonable expectation of recovery, are cared for in the rehab unit.

The patient's length of stay in the rehab unit depends on his or her diagnosis and rate of recovery. NFRH's "return to home" rate for rehab patients is 80 percent, and most have a very high return of normal function upon leaving the hospital.

The rehab unit also has an outpatient department, which serves patients who need continued therapy. A full range of services is offered, including driver's evaluations, hand specialists, a balance program and a seating clinic for wheelchair fitting. In addition, the hospital offers a busy outpatient cardiac rehab program.

in Birmingham, AL, and an additional year in general surgery at Medical College of Georgia. She appreciates the skills she gained during that difficult waiting period, noting that she utilizes them on a daily basis in her job today.

"Those years of experience have actually been a great bonus to me in my career," says Barnett. "Now, when I'm the first one on the scene in the emergency room, I have the training to take care of patients who need critical care."

Barnett completed the grueling residency, which is often the "jumping off" place for candidates who decide neurosurgery isn't the right field for them.

"The attrition rate in neurosurgery residencies is fairly high. It seems glamorous to be a brain surgeon. But when you get to the point you're working 15-16 hour days, it's not so glamorous," laughs Barnett. "Residency is a time when a lot of candidates simply realize they don't want to devote the time that brain surgery requires."

Barnett came to North Fulton Regional Hospital (NFRH) five years ago, and is one of two neurosurgeons on staff. She and her colleague, Steven Disch, put in the long hours that Barnett remembers her father putting in on the job years ago. And because NFRH is a Level II Trauma Center, one of the two physicians is on call 24/7.

"Twelve hours is about the average work day for us," Barnett says. "In my opinion, the hours and commitment are probably the main reasons that so few women go into neurosurgery. You basically have to give up everything else in your life to do neurosurgery—usually at the expense of your personal life—because of its emergency-based nature."

A routine work week for Barnett includes a variety of cases, with emergencies comprising about 15 percent of the caseload. Because it serves the fast-growing north Fulton, east Cobb, south Cherokee and Forsyth communities, NFRH's emergency and trauma departments are kept very busy.

Barnett, who performed more than 200 surgeries last year alone, acknowledges that the number of emergency cases has grown so much in the past few years that sometimes NFRH has to divert some patients to other hospitals when both of its neurosurgeons are busy. NFRH will add a much-needed third neurosurgeon to its staff in July 2005.

While she wouldn't necessarily recommend it to others, Barnett has no question in her mind that her unusually long and arduous path to becoming a neurosurgeon was well worth the effort. She enjoys the opportunity to help a very special segment of patients and to work with a dedicated staff at NFRH.

Barnett's philosophy on working in a field in which she has few female peers is simple but eloquent: "I've been given a gift and I share it." ■

About North Fulton Regional Hospital

North Fulton Regional Hospital (NFRH) has been serving the medical and healthcare needs of North Georgia residents for more than 20 years. This 167-bed acute-care regional hospital has a medical staff of more than 450 physicians, 1,000 healthcare professionals and 250 volunteers.

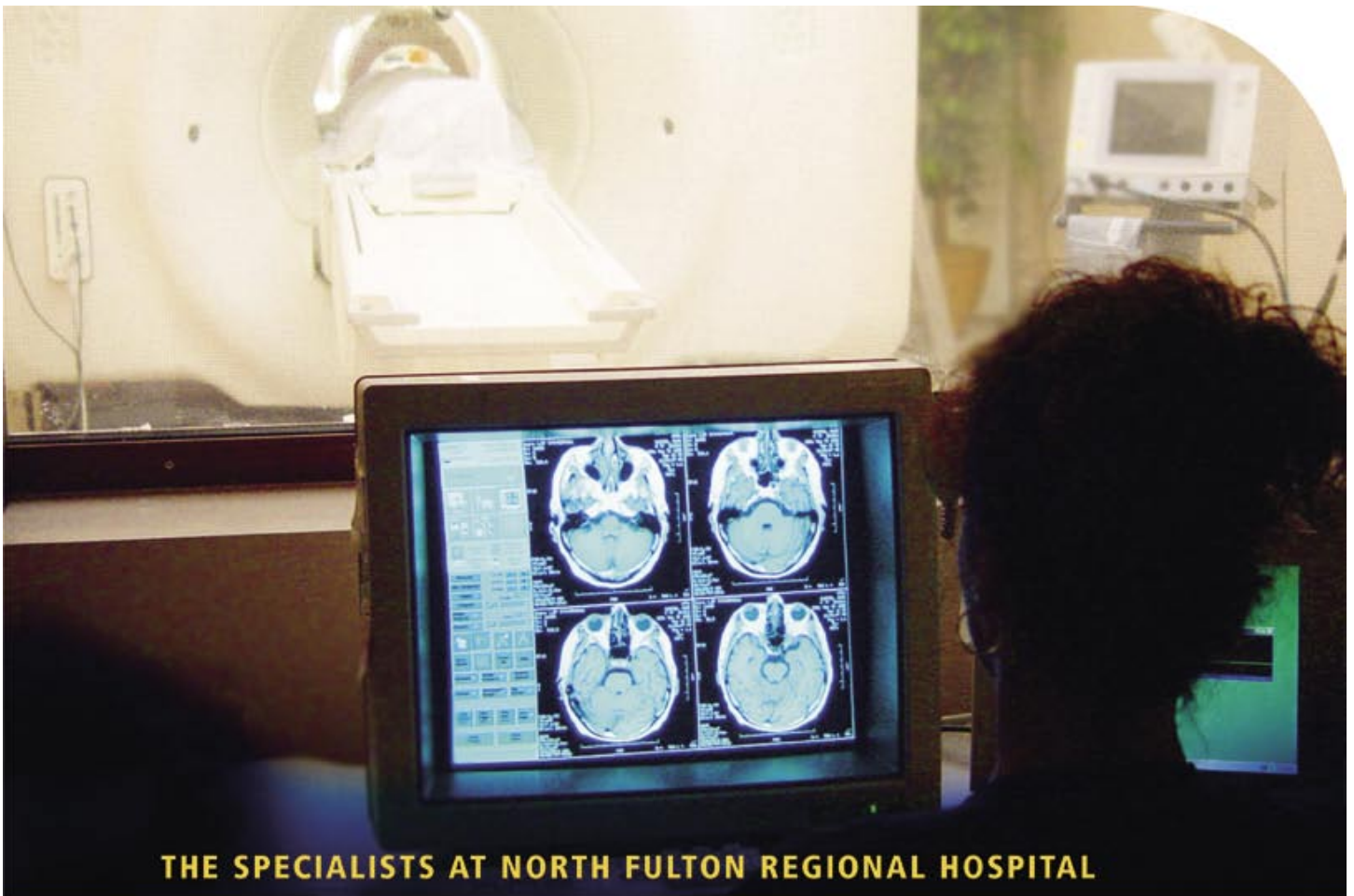
As a state-designated Level II Trauma Center, NFRH's emergency department is staffed with board-certified and board-eligible emergency physicians, nurses and technicians. The ER treats approximately 3,000 emergency cases each month.

NFRH provides a continuum of care through various centers. These include:

- **Neurosciences**—including neurosurgery, dedicated neuro/trauma intensive care unit, stroke center, spine center, pain control center and sleep center
- **Orthopedics**—including hip and knee replacement surgery and back surgery and sports medicine
- **Rehabilitation**—includes both a 33-bed acute inpatient unit, comprehensive outpatient services, day treatment program, driver evaluation program, amputee clinic and continence program
- **Surgical Services**—a variety of inpatient and outpatient surgery procedures including laparoscopic surgery, general surgery, breast surgery, urology and vascular surgery
- **Bariatric Surgical Weight Loss Center**—comprehensive, hospital-based, surgical weight loss program which includes pre- and post-operative education and support
- **Gastroenterology Services**—inpatient and outpatient endoscopy, digestive disorders treatment and colonoscopy
- **Oncology**—diagnostic and treatment services including mammography, stereotactic breast biopsy, prostate screenings and procedures, chemotherapy, medical oncology and blood transfusions

NFRH's free physician referral service responds to approximately 150 calls each month, referring patients to more than 450 affiliated medical staff physicians in various specialties. For more information, contact the Physician Referral Line at (770) 751-2600 or visit www.northfultonregional.com.

North Fulton Regional Hospital
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THE SPECIALISTS AT NORTH FULTON REGIONAL HOSPITAL

Neurosciences Center

NEURO/TRAUMA
INTENSIVE CARE UNIT

STROKE CENTER

SPINE CENTER

NEURO/STROKE
REHABILITATION UNIT

PAIN CONTROL CENTER

SLEEP CLINIC

North Fulton Regional Hospital offers several specialty centers of care for the diagnostic, treatment, surgical and rehabilitation needs for our patients. Our team of specialists provides a continuum of comprehensive services through a collaborative approach to patient care. To learn more about our board-certified neurosurgeons, neurologists, interventional radiologists, and physical medicine/rehabilitation physicians, contact our Physician Referral Service at (770)751-2600 or visit our website at www.northfultonregional.com.

North Fulton Regional Hospital

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