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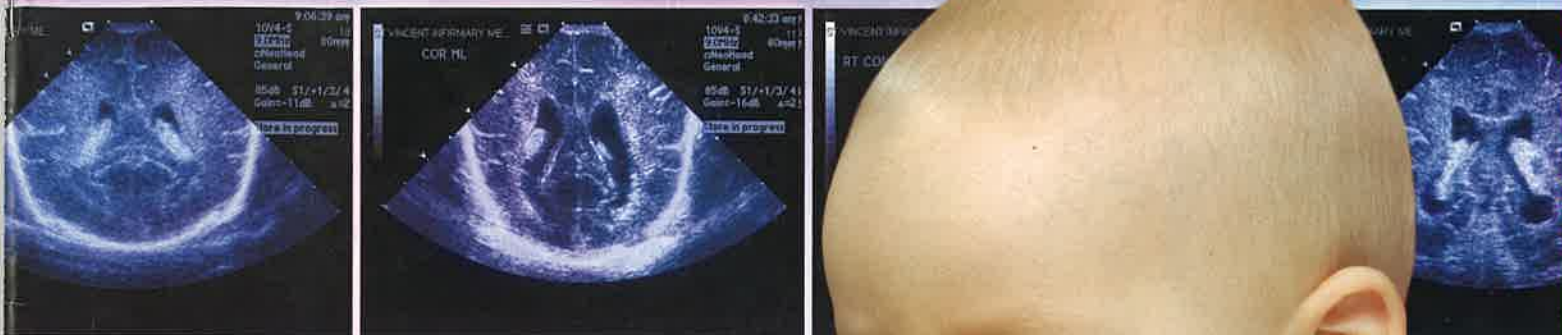
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# advance

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**PUBLISHER**  
Ann Wiest Kielinski

**GENERAL MANAGER**  
W.M. "Woody" Kielinski

**EDITORIAL**  
Editor-Joseph F. Jalkiewicz [jjalkiewicz@merion.com](mailto:jjalkiewicz@merion.com)  
Associate Editor-Mark McGraw [mmcgraw@merion.com](mailto:mmcgraw@merion.com)  
Senior Industry Editor-Scott Hatfield [shatfield@merion.com](mailto:shatfield@merion.com)  
Senior Technical Editor-Joyce Ward, CNMT, RT(N) [jward@merion.com](mailto:jward@merion.com)  
Editorial Assistant-Stacy Stanislaw [ssanislaw@merion.com](mailto:ssanislaw@merion.com)  
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Advance for Imaging and Radiation Therapy Professionals  
2900 Horizon Drive Box 61555  
King of Prussia, PA 19406-0956  
(610) 278-1400  
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## Thank You, Dr. Spitz

»They should have been having a candlelight dinner at some romantic restaurant. Instead, my parents celebrated their 15th wedding anniversary at West Jersey Hospital in Camden, N.J.



That's where yours truly came into the world on that rainy October day in 1962.

Joy and happiness, however, soon gave way to fear and worry as my parents

learned that I was born with two serious birth defects, spina bifida and hydrocephalus. Family legend has it that I was baptized by a nurse right there in the hospital, "just in case."

Bleak as things looked, the doctor offered a ray of hope. He said a certain pediatric neurosurgeon at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia might be able to help. Eugene B. Spitz, MD, was gaining an international reputation for pioneering a special device to drain the cerebrospinal fluid that builds up around the brain in hydrocephalus.

Within days my parents had me at CHOP, where Dr. Spitz closed the hole in my spine and implanted his "Spitz-Holter" shunt, which he developed with an engineer whose son was also born with hydrocephalus.

The surgery was successful, but Dr. Spitz cautioned that I would likely spend my life in a wheelchair or on crutches, confined to an institution.

Slowly but surely, though, I began to make progress, crawling, standing and walking all in about the expected time frames. As I got taller, Dr. Spitz operated five or six more times to lengthen the catheter that runs from the shunt to my abdomen. Otherwise, I pretty much grew up into your average Joe. I saw Dr. Spitz for the last time shortly before I turned 14, when he performed my final shunt revision.

From time to time over the years I thought about going back to visit Dr. Spitz. I Googled his name once and learned he was still practicing, well into his 80s. But just before Christmas 2006, my brother emailed me a link to Dr. Spitz's obituary in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

To my surprise, I felt something approaching stunned shock and regret, like when an old friend you've been meaning to call dies unexpectedly.

Reading his life story, distilled into 430 words, I also felt a sense of nostalgia. My twice-a-year checkups were often day-long missions, starting with X-rays and EEGs, followed by eternity in the waiting room. While my parents traded war stories with other parents, I read books or played with the other kids.

We'd finally get to see Dr. Spitz in the late afternoon. A big man who could be scary and friendly at the same time, he'd lift me up onto his exam table and percuss my head with his finger to make sure the shunt was working. He'd look over the X-rays with me and point out the catheter as it snaked down the front of my ribs from my head into my belly. I'd fearfully await his pronouncement of whether he'd see me again in six months or whether it was time for another revision—I was always afraid of the hospital.

But, I also felt a sense of awe, as I read about a man who was just 12 when he started college; 25 when he completed his medical training. Awe at a man whose contributions have helped save people around the world from disability and death.

And finally, I felt a strong sense of gratitude to be one of them. ■

*Joseph F. Jalkiewicz is editor of ADVANCE. He can be reached at [jjalkiewicz@merion.com](mailto:jjalkiewicz@merion.com).*