The Maricopa County Medical Society’s Round-up is pleased to bring you a new feature series, “Practice Spotlight”. Every month we will spotlight a physician or practice that has made changes to their care model for the benefit of the patient. If you would like to submit yourself or your practice for consideration, or would like to recommend another physician or practice group for our spotlight, please contact Jay Conyers at 602.251.2361 or jconyers@mcmsonline.com.

When Richard L. Averitte, Jr., MD, finished his dermatology residency at Case Western Reserve University Hospitals of Cleveland in 2002, he knew he was better suited for private practice and had no interest in working for someone else. So with the help of his business partner and wife, Marlie Averitte, he set out to build a technologically advanced dermatology practice in the Valley. To do so, Dr. Averitte went all-in with an EHR platform.

“From the very beginning, he never wanted paper records in his clinic, and despite the cost, we made the investment from the onset knowing it would pay off in the end,” according to Marlie, Chief Financial Officer for Affiliated and former Administrative Coordinator for the internal medicine residency program at Banner Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center. “We never cut corners and spared no expense.”

Today, Affiliated Dermatology® is one of the largest dermatology practices in the State of Arizona, with four clinics across the Valley, and caring for more than 3,500 patients per month. Of the 17 Affiliated physicians, five are Mohs micrographic surgeons and another four are fellowship-trained dermatopathologists. With clinics in Scottsdale, Surprise, Anthem, and Deer Valley, Affiliated employs more than a hundred people, although everyone the Society spoke with referred to it as one big family.
In speaking with Dr. Averitte, “Our practice is about having lives and families.”

**World-Class Dermatology Surgery**

Affiliated is not about cosmetic dermatology. It’s about clinical services for diagnosing, preventing, and treating skin diseases, ranging from severe acne to malignant melanomas. With five Mohs surgeons on staff and one of the few Slow Mohs facilities in the Western United States, Affiliated Dermatology® is able to handle the toughest of skin cancer cases. By utilizing slow Mohs, surgeons are able to spare cancer-free skin tissue while achieving near complete removal of malignant melanomas.

With nearly 300 sunny days each year in Phoenix, there isn’t a more appropriate place in the United States to have state-of-the-art skin cancer treatment than the Valley of the Sun. And with the ever-growing population of snowbirds to our region, the need for highly trained dermatological care is on the rise. Affiliated is addressing this need by ensuring that its clinics offer the most technologically advanced surgical capabilities availability.

Dr. Averitte adds, “We’re investing in the best trained dermatologists, and the best techniques, such as Mohs and slow Mohs, to ensure that our patients receive the best care. Anything less is simply unacceptable. We treated 156 patients last year using slow Mohs, which is a high number for our region, but it’s not good enough. We need to keep pushing the envelope in order to reach more patients.”

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When Dr. Averitte invested in a full EHR while launching Affiliated in 2002, he saw the value of having hands-on support for the entire team.

“From the beginning, we demanded a lot from our Allscripts service engineers, and made sure that our investment was worthwhile, not only for our staff, but also for our physicians,” according to Dr. Averitte.

He realized the value in working with a limited number of engineers in order to minimize the “learning curve” for client-customer interactions, and eventually convinced the primary service engineer from Allscripts to join his team.

After working closely with Scott Maniates, who at the time was a full-time engineer with Allscripts, since Affiliated’s initial onboarding of its EHR, Dr. Averitte convinced Scott to join the clinic as its in-house EHR specialist. Now Affiliated’s Chief Information Officer, Scott oversees the entire IT infrastructure for the group and services not only the four Valley clinics, but also ensures that there are no hiccups with the two home-based CLIA certified pathology laboratories.

When interviewed by the Society, Scott said, “I love the opportunity to work more closely with the users of the system. I am now able to focus on training the staff on how to use it, and ensure that they feel comfortable knowing that we have the support team to respond to any of their needs.”

Quality Driven Histopathology

As is the case with all dermatology practices, especially those focusing on disease prevention and treatment, Affiliated is heavily reliant upon high-quality histology and pathology. Initially, the clinic took the usual route of sending specimens out for processing and analysis, and was unable to have any input over quality or processing time. Dr. Averitte saw this as a bottleneck, and an impediment to offering his patients better care, so he invested in building a cutting-edge dermatopathology lab within the Scottsdale clinic.

According to Dr. Averitte, “If we couldn’t guarantee our patients the ideal balance of efficiency and quality, then it didn’t make sense for us to send out our specimens. By building it all in house, we were able to strengthen that collaborative partnership between the dermatologists and the pathologists, and ensure that our patients get better care. That’s ultimately what it’s all about.”

Affiliated invested in the resources to provide full service pathology from their Scottsdale clinic, from sectioning to staining to analysis. In addition to the four fellowship-trained dermatopathologists, the Affiliated Laboratory employs eight histology technicians, each of whom are cross trained in sectioning, grossing, and staining.

Stacie Schimke, who manages the histology lab and supervises the half dozen full-time histotechnicians, joined affiliated in 2006 and has nearly 25 years of histology training, which began at the Armed Forces Institute for Pathology while enlisted in the Unites States Air Force.
Says Stacie, “Before coming to Affiliated, I had worked in a few GI and dermatology reference labs. When they approached me in 2006, I jumped at the opportunity to have an input over quality. Other places, they largely have marginal quality because of the quick turnaround time, but quality is optimal with Affiliated.”

Stacie is also heavily involved in Affiliated non-profit arm for providing care to patients who cannot afford skin cancer treatment. She has helped the clinic build a tissue bank for tissues and blood, with the idea that scientists will soon utilize Affiliated as a resource for marker identification research, and hopefully help advance treatments further.

An Investment in Dermatopathology: An Obvious Clinical Partnership

Too often, pathologists spend little time with patients and instead view the specimens under their microscopes as their clinical subjects. That’s not the case at Affiliated. With four dermatopathologists on staff, and on-site, Affiliated Dermatology® embraces the philosophy that the dermatologists and pathologists have to be an extension of one another. The patients that Affiliated sees aren’t just patients of the dermatologists, but the pathologists alike.

According to Dr. Sarah Estrada, Laboratory Director for Affiliated and board certified in dermatopathology, anatomic pathology, and clinical pathology, “We value the ability to communicate directly with the dermatologists, as well as our relationships with our technicians. Dr. Averitte has really helped create a family environment here, and his vision is unparalleled. He embraces the philosophy that it’s about us looking at patients, not just slides.”

Affiliated has one of the few College of American Pathologists (CAP) certified dermatopathology laboratories in Arizona. When it initially opened in 2006, the laboratory processed more than 10,500 biopsies during its first year of operation, and now possess the resources to easily handle the more than 30,000 it saw last year. Carrying out more than 5,000 immunohistochemical stains in 2013, Affiliated Laboratories® is now seeing more than 150 melanoma cases per year, and poised to grow even more.

“One thing we won’t do is compromise on quality, but we see an opportunity to reach more patients throughout our state,” says Dr. Averitte.

Dr. Jena Auerbach, a fellow dermatopathologist and colleague of Dr. Estrada’s at Affiliated, says, “It takes a lot of money and resources to open up a full-service lab, and it takes a real hand at business to do this. Affiliated is fortunate enough to have six CLIA-certified laboratories, two of which are home office labs. You simply don’t see this anywhere else.”

A Family Environment

Affiliated has, and always will be, a family operation, and views each of its employees as a part of the family. Suzanne Murry, Operations Manager at Affiliated, joined the clinic in 2005 as an extern while completing her certification in Medical Assisting. She’s now been with Affiliated for nearly a decade, and knows the entire operation from front to back. She oversees more than sixty employees and despite having significant management responsibilities at Affiliated, she was able to recently complete a certificate in Business Management with the support of Dr. Averitte.
“He and Marlie are family oriented, and truly care for their own,” according to Suzanne. “They really invest in their employees, treat them as family, and instill in them a confidence that you rarely see elsewhere.”

Giving Back to the Community – Arizona Skin Cancer Foundation

By 2011, and nearly a decade into Affiliated’s inception, Dr. Averitte had already seen the full spectrum of patients — individuals with early indicators of skin disease to those with fully advanced cancers, to those with the resources to get adequate care and those who simply could not. He saw a need for the delivery of care to the less fortunate, and launched the Arizona Skin Cancer Foundation in 2011. Aiming to provide financial assistance to those with skin cancer unable to afford treatment, the Foundation was launched to not only provide care but also community awareness and education. In 2013, Arizona Skin Care Foundation enrolled 10 patients in its assistance program, covering all aspects of malignant melanoma treatment, including all follow-up labs as well as transportation.

Nina Aganovic, Assistant Operations Manager at Affiliated, says, “We aim to not only treat patients, but also reach people before they become skin cancer patients. We’ve rolled out a resource program for students, focusing on educating them about sun safety and skin cancer. If we can make them more aware of the risks of skin cancer at an early age, then we believe they’ll be more aware of the risks as they grow into adults.”

In the next year, Affiliated is poised to create a research arm to their Foundation through government grants and private donations, and is working to partner with local universities, research organizations, and laboratories to provide a critical resource for advancing our understanding of how to diagnose and treat skin cancer.

Affiliated is quickly becoming a community leader, and recently hosted the second annual Arizona Skin Cancer Foundation 5K run/walk, held December 3rd at The Shops at Pinnacle Peak. In early March, the Foundation served as the medical sponsor for the Phoenix Marathon and sponsor for the Grand Canyon University Run to Fight Children’s Cancer.

Caring for Patients: Full Circle

In a little more than a decade, Affiliated Dermatology® has grown from a fledgling private practice group to one of the state’s leading centers for skin disease and prevention centers.

As Dr. Averitte recently summarized, “We see so much opportunity for growth, and for improving upon the delivery of care. We want to be the leaders in how our state responds to skin disease, and we know the keys are education, early treatment, and cutting-edge intervention. We’re poised to embrace all of these, and hope we can touch more lives for years to come.”

Dr. Jay Conyers is the Executive Director for MCMS and CEO of the Medical Society Business Services. He can be reached at jconyers@mcmsonline.com or by calling 602.252.2015.