

## **Fernhoff helps patients through difficult times**

By Tonya Layman, *Contributing Writer*, Published on: 5/09/08

Dr. Paul Fernhoff helps families through one of life's most painful experiences -- the death of a child.

But as important as he is to families dealing with end-of-life care, he has established himself as equally critical in beginning-of-life care, by advancing the prevention and early detection of birth defects.

"Paul Fernhoff has many faces. There is his research face, his clinical face and the family counseling face," said Mark Oshnock, CEO and president of Visiting Nurse | Hospice Atlanta. "He is a pretty unique guy. He has developed a long-lasting reputation in the state of Georgia focused on inherited birth defects."

Fernhoff is a 2008 Health-Care Heroes Awards finalist in the Physician category.

Oshnock says Fernhoff works in several capacities, all related to birth defects. His passion is prevention and early detection, but he provides a full package of services, from prevention to giving hope for healthy living to end-of-life care and the time to say goodbye.

"The best part of my job is the knowledge that you have either prevented a very serious, life-threatening illness or when you have run out of treatments you will provide the child with the best care possible to help the family ease the transition of when the child is no longer there," Fernhoff said.

More than 25 years ago, the New Jersey native left Philadelphia, where he completed his residency in pediatrics at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, to work for two years in Atlanta at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the Genetics Laboratory and Birth Defects Divisions.

That two-year assignment led to a career in this field and a life in Atlanta.

"At the time, we were becoming more and more convinced that early detection and prevention could minimize defects," Fernhoff said.

Today, he is a tenured associate professor of human genetics and pediatrics and the medical director of the Division of Medical Genetics and of the Emory Lysosomal Storage Disease Clinic. He is a visiting scientist in the Division of

Newborn Screening and Molecular Biology Laboratory at the CDC. He also has genetic clinics and sees patients and is an attending physician at all Children's Healthcare of Atlanta facilities.

"I love what I am doing," he said. "I spend time with incredibly bright people. Every day is different. I have to have five different desks in order to be productive."

Perhaps what he is best known for is his compassion in the family counseling side of his work.

In 1992, Fernhoff became medical director of the pediatric hospice program of Visiting Nurse | Hospice Atlanta. He was the first and only hospice medical director specializing in end-of-life care for children in Atlanta.

The program has helped hundreds of children and families deal with the time in a sick child's life where all options have been exhausted and the time has come for a dignified, pain-free death.

"He is loved and highly respected by the Hospice Atlanta clinicians, frequently going above and beyond the call of duty," Oshnock said. "He advises and supports the nurses, educates the families, listens to the children. When he talks about his patients, it's clear he has tremendous compassion and a true love of the work."

Fernhoff chaired the Georgia Newborn Screening Advisory Committee from 2000 to 2008. He is a member of the national March of Dimes Newborn Screening Advisory Committee and did pioneering work to develop better ways of testing babies for genetic conditions. He helped create a coalition to support the process in Georgia, which ultimately required changing legislation. Now 147,000 new babies are tested annually in Georgia, of which 1,500 are found to have genetic conditions that can then be treated, thus reducing the chance of developmental disabilities.