

Doctors' visits are healing salve for India's neediest



CAREY WAGNER/SUN SENTINEL

Dr. Shashi Kusuma sees patient David Keeny at his Plantation practice, Suria Plastic Surgery. The 39-year-old native of southern India was educated and trained in the United States and practiced in Cleveland, Ohio, before moving to South Florida last year.



Nicole Brochu
Our Health

Finding the time and extra resources to devote to philanthropic causes can seem a Herculean task for many of today's doctors. But some manage. And in doing so, they change lives a world away.

A young mother horribly disfigured by an accidental kitchen fire in southern India is one of hundreds who can attest to their success. After the blaze, she found herself homeless, shunned by her husband and estranged from her two children. In a culture that puts a premium on unblemished beauty, the once-attractive woman with the extensive scars was left alone and destitute.

But hope and healing didn't elude her for long. She learned a new definition of beauty in the kindness of strangers who embraced her when her loved ones would not.

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Live health chat

Doctors who pursue philanthropic causes face many challenges. Ask Dr. Shashi Kusuma about this and other topics during a live online chat at noon Friday. Go to SunSentinel.com/chat to submit your questions in advance.



DR. SHASHI KUSUMA/COURTESY

Dr. Shashi Kusuma stands by the bed of one of his young patients, as the child's mother looks on, during last year's medical mission to Kullu, India.

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These strangers had the tools, training and determination to restore mobility to her scarred limbs, reconstruct much of her damaged tissue and make her feel worthy again — and all it cost her was a thank you.

The mother, still in her 20s, has since found a job, has a bright outlook on life and is even working toward reuniting with her kids.

“Now she’s putting her life back together,” said Dr. Shashi Kusuma, a Plantation plastic surgeon who has led two medical missions to his home country of India to help people with limited means or access to medical care, the disfigured mother among them. “You look at these cases, and you feel good about what you accomplished. You can look back and say, ‘My life had meaning.’”

That meaning is Kusuma’s reward, and it’s often the strongest motivator for philanthropic physicians like him.

The treks to India — one in 2009 to Jalandhar, Punjab, another last year to Kullu, Himachal Pradesh, and a third being planned for this fall — are at the heart of the humanitarian mission of the American Society of Indian Plastic Surgeons, a membership organization of 150 U.S. board-certified plastic surgeons of Indian descent.

More than two years after Kusuma created the group, its plastic surgeons have seen 300 to 400 of India’s neediest patients and operated on 50 to 60 of them, repairing cleft palates, removing giant tumors, reconstructing damaged tissue scarred by severe burns and otherwise correcting physical abnormalities left by disease, injury and congenital deformity.

“This is why we got into medicine,” Kusuma said. “At the end of the day, it comes down to that basic human thing, and that’s helping one another.”



DR. SHASHI KUSUMA/COURTESY

Dr. Shashi Kusuma, right, and colleagues from the American Society of Indian Plastic Surgeons, perform a plastic surgery procedure by flashlight in Kullu, India, in 2010.

doors open at home is challenging enough.

“It seems to me that things are not as easy as they used to be” to practice medicine in America, said Kusuma, 39, a native of southern India who was educated and trained in America and practiced in Cleveland, Ohio, before moving to Plantation last year. “It’s getting more and more complicated.”

The medical missions, though, reap their own reward: Kusuma has found that the trips take him and his colleagues back to the roots of their life’s work.

“For that week or 10 days, you’re not worried about paying the bills or all that legal mumbo jumbo. Everything else is stripped away, and you’re left with the basic elements of ‘why you’re there, and that’s to take care of another human being,” he said. “In that moment, nothing else is exchanged but services and thank you’s.”

Kusuma and his colleagues would like to do the same for the impoverished here in America, he said, but the risk in today’s regulatory and legal environment — not to mention the notoriously litigious climate driving the malpractice crisis — is just too high. So they travel great distances to feed their urge to give back.

Dr. Linda Civerchia

receiving a fax in India could be a challenge; now collaborating physicians can co-write papers via email and refer to surgical procedures on the Internet.

But with just 600 or 700 plastic surgeons in India, a country of 1.2 billion people, Kusuma finds that globalization has not lessened the need for his group’s services. He’s determined to keep up the annual treks, despite the logistical challenges.

Kusuma operates a solo practice, so he understands the hardship of forgoing two weeks of paid medical services to travel abroad for charitable work. He credits the collaboration inherent in the overseas trips for making it all the easier for him to make the sacrifice.

Each of the four or five members of the American Society of Indian Plastic Surgeons who make the trek in any one year has to pay for his or her own personal travel expenses. The group also raises money — nearly \$60,000 over the past two years — through family, friends, Facebook campaigns and with the help of Med-Wish International to pay for medical supplies and the services of local physicians in India.

Those local doctors are critical to the mission’s success. Not only do they exten-

American doctors traveling overseas to provide free, life-altering medical assistance to people in less-developed countries is hardly a new trend. When Sri Lanka was slammed by a tsunami in 2004, hundreds of U.S. medical experts flew overseas to help survivors, following a long-standing tradition of international volunteerism. When Haiti was struck by an earthquake in 2010, many others did the same. And Doctors Without Borders, Operation Smile and a host of other humanitarian organizations have been changing and saving lives in foreign countries one operation at a time for decades.

But with medical care in the United States undergoing a seismic shift, when many doctors are struggling in an era of defensive medicine, when escalating insurance costs and the weight of malpractice concerns are chipping away at the quality of patient care, keeping the

understands. That deep-seated desire to help those with no other options is what drove her and her husband, Dr. Alvan Balent, to faraway locales like Bombay (now known as Mumbai), India, and Tibet for decades. Before retiring a few years ago, the longtime Fort Lauderdale ophthalmologists made about a half-dozen trips overseas, restoring the vision of thousands of patients beset by cataracts and teaching local doctors state-of-the-art but simple techniques that allowed them to perform a high volume of surgeries efficiently.

"I had always wanted to do something like that ever since I can remember," Civerchia said. "I guess because there was such a need."

That need has subsided some, she said, because the globalization of technology has made it infinitely easier to share resources and expertise. In the early 1990s,

sively screen patients to identify the neediest ones, they also handle the logistics of the 10-day mission and provide crucial follow-up care once the American doctors have gone home.

"We're building bonds with one another by going to the mother land and giving something back," Kusuma said. "Giving back is a good thing, no matter where you do it, but for us, this has a little extra meaning."

As the burn survivor with the rejuvenated outlook discovered, there's undeniable beauty in such selflessness. It's a trait that the young Plantation doctor believes is inherent in the vast majority of those who choose medicine as their calling.

"In spite of all the stress, the malpractice, this and that, most doctors go into it for the right reasons," he said. "To do the right thing."