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Indian-American neurosurgeon from Illinois hospital finds experience in India 'transformative'

By a Staff Writer - June 22, 2018

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Dr. Sheri Dewan, a neurosurgeon at Northwestern Medicine Central DuPage Hospital, on a recent humanitarian medical mission in Kochi, Kerala. (Photo courtesy NMCDH)

Dr. Sheri Dewan, a neurosurgeon at Northwestern Medicine Central DuPage Hospital, experienced the global health crisis first-hand on a recent humanitarian medical mission to southern India. Dr. Dewan, who is a resident of Lake Forest, Ill., volunteered at the Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences, based in Kochi, Kerala.

In India, there is less than 1 doctor for every 1,000 citizens according to the World Health Organization. The shortage of neurosurgeons is at a crisis level, where 3,500 neurosurgeons are responsible for a population of more than 1.2 billion, noted a June 18, press release from Northwestern.

"It was an eye-opening experience to witness the access issue. There were 170 people in the waiting room. Some had traveled 8 to 10 hours simply to be seen by a neurosurgeon," Dr. Dewan is quoted saying, adding, "The heat was stifling, yet there was no air conditioning. Despite the hardships, these dedicated medical professional are finding ways to get things done."

Dr. Dewan stepped forward to help with several brain tumors surgeries, performed follow-up visits with patients in the hospital and examined patients in the outpatient clinics. She says she was especially touched by the story of a young boy and his mother who traveled from north India to be seen. He was born with cerebral palsy from anoxic brain injury of prematurity and suffers from spastic movements. They wanted to know if he will ever walk.



Dr. Sheri Dewan at the Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences in Kochi, Kerala, examining a patient. Dr. Dewan is a neurosurgeon who was on a humanitarian medical mission to southern India. (Photo courtesy Northwestern Medicine Central DuPage Hospital, Illinois)

"They have no money for a wheelchair, so his mother carries him everywhere," said Dr. Dewan. "In the United States, a child with this condition would have a wheelchair, a case-manager to coordinate his care, a medication pump to treat his spastic movements, but that is not available in India."

The only option for this young boy was a one-time decompression of the nerves to try to release some of the rigidity and retraction in his arms. With minimal follow-up and few options, Dr. Dewan was impressed with the mother's dedication to improving her son's life.

As a thank you for her time in India, the hospital arranged a meeting for Dr. Dewan with their spiritual guru and world humanitarian, Amma (Hindi-mother). She was driven three hours north of Cochin to a small fishing village by the Indian Ocean to her ashram. There she was taken for a meditation session with Amma and her disciples. The newcomers were then invited for her blessings.

"She gives hugs to people, so far 30 million hugs. The experience was very peaceful, she asked questions about my work and experiences via an interpreter," said Dr. Dewan. "Whatever one's religious beliefs, her humanitarian work is undeniable. She raised \$46.5 million for Indian disaster relief in a matter of days, and has also given \$10 million to victims of Hurricane Katrina and the Sri Lankan tsunami."

Dr. Dewan describes her overall experience in India as transformative and enlightening on many levels.

"The surgeons in India make do with what they have. It made me appreciate the level of services we can offer patients in the United States," said Dr. Dewan. "I hope to encourage other trained surgeons to volunteer their time and talent to address this global health crisis."