

Plastic surgery far from vanity

Jersey doctor takes a break to serve the poor abroad

BY ROZ GIUDITTA
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Sanjay Lalla, a board-certified plastic surgeon with offices in West Orange and Jersey City, normally devotes his practice to beautifying affluent suburban women with Botox, tummy tucks and liposuction.

But twice a year, he travels abroad and operates on an entirely different kind of patient.

They're young, they're poor and they're disfigured.

All were born with a cleft lip, a birth defect that creates an unsightly opening in the upper lip between the mouth and the nose. It can range from a slight notch in the red portion of the lip to complete separation in one or both sides of the lip extending up and into the nose.

"You're really doing something, you're really changing people's lives," said the 38-year-old Westfield resident of his recent trip to India with a small but well-known organization called Dr. Dicksheet's India Project. "It was the best experience — it's pure plastic surgery."

"There, you're the only thing between them and not ever having the surgery done," said Lalla, who is also chief of plastic surgery for the Liberty Health Care System at the Jersey City Medical Center and a clinical assistant professor at UMDNJ in Newark.

The exact cause of the condition is unknown, but it is thought to be a combination of genetic and environmental factors. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons Web site, a cleft lip occurs in approximately one out of every 800 births. For babies born in the United States, the condition is usually corrected at birth.

But in places like India and the Philippines, many people believe that the child is cursed or that the mother has sinned. Some also believe that if the defect is repaired, the curse shifts onto the entire family, so parents often do nothing about their child's condition.

And at approximately \$150 per procedure, the operation is beyond the reach of most poor families.

Viewed as social outcasts, the children may be abandoned or ostracized and have little chance at a normal life. Babies are unable to suckle and may starve to death.

Lalla has volunteered several weeks a year since 1998 to perform free cleft lip surgeries on children in India, the Philippines, Kenya and El Salvador.

The India Project and the Lions Club provided food and housing for Lalla and another American doctor. The physicians paid for their flights and brought their own instruments and supplies.

Publicized by radio and newspaper, the free surgery camp draws families from miles around. They arrive by scooter, rickshaw, oxcart and on foot, some of them without shoes.

"They're so desperate to have the surgery that they'll travel and camp out there



Patients wait in line for operations from plastic surgeon Sanjay Lalla at Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Hospital in Aurangabad, India.

all week until they get it done," said Lalla.

His latest trip was to Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Hospital in Aurangabad, a large city in central India, about 150 miles east of Mumbai (Bombay).

Then, Sharadkumar Dicksheet, founder of the India Project, and the two other doctors held a screening of close to 1,000 people to determine which surgeries could be performed and in what order. The 71-year-old Dicksheet also performs surgeries on older children and some adults with crossed eyes, droopy eyes, scars and cleft palates.

During the week, Lalla operated non-stop from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Cleft lip patients are chosen using the "rule of 10," which means they must be at least 10 weeks of age, have a blood count of 10 grams of hemoglobin and weigh at least 10 pounds.

In one week, Lalla performed about 65 surgeries and was able to cut his time for each procedure from 30 minutes to 12. "The name of the game with this is really volume," he said. "You're trying to treat as many kids as possible."

Lalla, who was born in the United States, does not speak much Hindi or Marathi, the regional language, which made one of the volunteer scrub nurses who spoke serviceable English invaluable.

"I was really clinging to him," Lalla said. To encourage the nurse to return, he gave him his New York Knicks cap in the middle of the week.

On his last day there, Lalla gave the



Lalla, in his West Orange office, examines an X-ray of a hand with an extra finger.

nurse his FDNY T-shirt.

"He was so happy," said Lalla. "I learned that in the Philippines, you bring things and give them away. They're so happy for anything that says American."

Lalla also learned about the preciousness of resources.

"What you really realize is how much we waste here and how appreciative people are of little things there. You reuse

gloves. You wash them and reuse them. The gown I wore, I used all day. The mask I wore, I used all day."

"When I finished the week," Lalla said, "I gave away all my instruments because everybody wanted something, from my water bottle to my hats to my scrubs."

To learn more about the India Project, visit drdicksheet.com or e-mail murphy.pianoman@att.net.