

Her life's true calling is helping the elderly

The most successful people are invariably those who spend the most time thinking about who they are and where they are going, and then constantly re-evaluating their progress in light of who they are and what they really want in life!

Dr Rekha Bhandari is one such fortunate individual, happily living her life's true calling- helping the elderly live with a better quality of life.

A physician specializing in Internal Medicine, Palliative Medicine and Geriatrics, she is part of a group practice in New York State. But that is not all this gifted doctor does. She is also the chief medical officer of Allure, a growing group of Brooklyn-based skilled nursing facilities and rehabilitation centers providing a high standard of care for elderly patients.

"My job with Allure is focused on not just overseeing physicians. I am involved in implementation of policy/protocol on various medical managements. The ultimate goal is to avoid hospitalization, improve quality of care and ensure better patient outcome. It is also more of tweaking and improving and leaving my own mark of high quality care. I work with things such as improving patient outcome," she says.

While the job is satisfying, it is not the only thing Dr Bhandari pursues. Geriatrics is a subject she feels very passionately about - she has spoken on ageing at the United Nations as the keynote speaker - Inter-generational Gaps and Best Practices, in February 2015.

Spending a lot of time in academics, she serves as Chief of Geriatrics at the Kingsbrook Jewish Medical Center in Brooklyn, NY. Teaching is her passion. "I teach budding medical students and residents - who are the future doctors of this country," she says with pride.

But the biggest gem in her bouquet of accolades is a program she started in 2005, called HOPE, a home visit program for the elderly.

"If I were to compare, I would say that this happens in India all the time," she says. "It did not take much for the thought to come to my head. At my practice in Queens, NY, I would notice the general discomfort the elderly have while visiting a doctor. This included things like long waiting times, so much discomfort in a wheelchair, and sometimes even difficulty in arriving at the facility. So I thought why not start something like offering doctors home visits to the elderly? After all, doctors don't really pay house calls here, and it is definitely needed, especially by the elderly."

The idea was met with enthusiasm by all she proposed it to. Starting with 10 patients, the program has 250 active patients today.

"It took us nearly two years to get the program up and running seamlessly. We started off with basic physician services, and now provide a bouquet of services that manage to keep patients successfully out of hospitals. We bring radiology home to the patient. We do lab work at home too. And the best thing is that the turnaround time for results is about 24 hours, which is sometimes faster than if they actually go out and get it done. We offer various services such as Meals on Wheels, Meds to Beds programs, which delivers medication to homes and also provides medication reconciliation. Basically, we offer all services that are required to keep the patients in a comfortable environment, allowing them to age comfortably and avoid hospitalization," Dr Bhandari explains.

While she is helping the seniors in the United States by making medical practice more comfortable and accessible for them, her heart still beats for India and the difference



Dr Rekha Bhandari has dedicated her life to improving the quality of life of the elderly in New York.

she could make there in healthcare for the elderly.

"I feel there's hardly any focus on geriatrics in India, and it amazes me. Currently, there are about 80 million seniors in India, and in the next couple of decades, there will be about 300 million! So much can and needs to be done. I wish there is more focus on geriatrics and palliative medicine, whether it is for profit or government-run, frankly, it does not matter. There should be cultural change starting from medical education in the field of geriatrics and pal-

liative medicine to healthcare expenditure dedicated to manage senior lives. After all, the elderly are a valuable part of our society. And who is medically sensitive for their hearing, their vision, their fall risk..." she trails off.

Dr Bhandari hopes that in the near future, she will be able to contribute more to her country of birth. Physicians such as Dr Devi Shetty, who started the Narayana Hrudalaya, are already doing so much for public health in India. Dr Bhandari hopes, in time, to be one of those too!