Local podiatrist shares his skills in Tanzania

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Dr. Mansoor Virani made a lot of people cry during the three weeks he worked at the Aga Khan hospital in Dar es Salaam, the capital of Tanzania.

The Glenview podiatrist's patients' tears were of joy and relief at finally escaping painful, debilitating foot ailments that rarely plague patients in industrialized nations.

Virani usually doesn't have to treat advanced diabetic foot ulcers and gangrenous toes at his clinics in Oak Brook and Des Plaines because he educates patients about diabetic foot care and performs special nail clippings that can prevent such infections.

Yet one of the wealthier men in Dar es Salaam, an influential government official, came to Virani with gangrene that began as a nick during toe-nail clipping.

"Over here in the U.S., we are lucky and blessed," said Virani, during an interview at his home in The Glen, where he lives with his wife, Shezana, and their sons, Nabil, 2, and Arman, 4. "Africa is one of the continents that needs more attention. People there are suffering continuously."

A native of Karachi, Pakistan, Virani is a follower of Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of Ismaili Muslims - one sect of Shiite Muslims - whose foundation funds hospitals in Pakistan and India.

Virani, who immigrated to the United States in 1985, had not set foot on the African continent before his trip to Dar es Salaam, but he decided to volunteer after hearing about the needs of the new hospital there.

It provides some of the best treatment in the country, Virani said, but it lacks modern equipment and its physicians are not trained in the latest procedures, or even some treatments considered routine in the United States.

And most residents there are extremely poor and lack health insurance, so they wait to seek treatment until they are in agony.

One of Virani's patients, a 55-year-old woman, had been hobbling on a neuroma - a thickened nerve on balls of the foot - for more than 20 years. Virani was able to remove the tumor and the attending local doctor was shocked to see that such a simple procedure alleviated so much suffering, Virani recalled.

"He said that he could have done it, if only he'd known how," he said.

Even more common than diabetic foot ulcers at the clinic is gout, a painful arthritic inflammation of the foot, which usually affects men. Virani said he saw many cases of gout in Tanzanian women because their diet is dominated by red meat, leading to high levels of uric acid.

During his three week visit last February, Virani put in 11-hour days to perform more than 20 surgeries and 200 treatments.

Local doctors assisted in the procedures so they could master techniques.

"I cannot express how people were so happy," said Virani, who paid for the $7,000 trip. "I had a patient with an open ulcer. He couldn't afford treatment and doctors didn't even know what to do. I did surgery and closed up the wound. The family had tears in their eyes, and his teenage daughter said 'Now my father can walk again.' "

While Virani was dismayed to see easily treatable conditions reach such advanced stages, he found he was able to offer less drastic treatments than might have been prescribed at the hospital.

For example, doctors told the wealthy founder that he'd likely lose his leg below the knee, but Virani was able to treat him by amputating the two affected toes. He hopes to return to the hospital and is heartened by the number of colleagues - from a variety of medical disciplines and religious backgrounds - who have expressed interest in joining him there.

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