

INDEX

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Letters to the Editor..... | A2 |
| People..... | A3 |
| Immigration..... | A48 |
| Business..... | A33 |
| Community..... | A46 |
| Magazine..... | M1 |
| Sports..... | A44 |

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Making a difference in mental health care

GEORGE JOSEPH

The South Asian community is often reluctant to seek help for mental health issues, fearing a stigma associated with them said Dr Vasudev N Makhija, clinical associate professor, department of psychiatry at Seton Hall University School of Graduate Medical Education.

Dr Makhija has launched the South Asian Mental Health Initiative and Network — a network of providers and a resource for patients.

Already about 60 providers from New Jersey are listed on the Web site. It will address issues of stigma, access to care, spiritual/pastoral care, and developing a network of mental health providers to provide culturally competent psychiatric care.

It also aims to serve as a resource to provide consultation to policy makers and health-care facilities.

"Often people would ask me to suggest an expert whom they could visit discreetly. They needed someone who understood their cultural background and preferably spoke their language," Dr Makhija said.

A psychiatrist with 25 years of experience, he has served as the president of the New Jersey Psychiatric Association.

At the event attended by over 100 health-care professionals in Edison, Dr Makhija remembered how he was forced by his Dalit neighbors to provide medical care even as a medical student.

His mother was concerned about him visiting patients from the lower castes. "But I knew she was proud of me in her heart for helping others," he said, adding that those days taught him the value of service.

He was not sure how his foundation would be received in the community. When he spoke to psychiatrists and health-care providers, they supported the idea and a host of volunteers joined to set up the organization.

New Jersey Assemblyman Upendra Chivukula noted that Hindu temples were not investing enough in social services.

"People often ask how I keep going on, even though I am

68. My answer always is that I would not miss an opportunity to help others, whenever possible and it gives me immense happiness and strength," he said.

Dr Charles Ciolino, president, New Jersey Psychiatric Association, said that people associated with the organization could do great things for the community to change the world.

Dr Ashok Khusalani, a psychiatrist and president of the Khusalani Foundation from Texas, recalled how his younger days in India shaped his philosophy.

Dr Padma Arvind, executive director, New Jersey Health Care Talent Network, — part of the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations — pointed out the importance of medical education as the country faces severe shortage of doctors.

Dr Parantap Pandya, who runs the Family Problem Solutions in New Jersey, said most South Asians have been coping with mental illness "in a faulty way by denial, avoidance and pretending it will go away. By not getting professional help and keeping it a secret."

Even when families reach out, Dr Pandya added, there are not enough mental health professionals who understand cultural issues adequately.

SAMHIN addresses both issues by helping the community to 'come out', create a dialogue and make it 'okay' to talk and learn about mental health related issues.

Dr Rajiv Juneja felt many South Asian families are unfamiliar with illicit drugs and drug use.

"They deny drug and alcohol problems in their families due to the stigma that accompanies such choices. Often, these are seen as something shameful," he said.

"One thing is clear: Those in treatment do better than those not. In order to help our adolescents and young adults, we have to be able to talk to them and ask them questions about what may be going on in their lives. Often family members don't feel confident enough to have this necessary conversation. This is where the support of a professional can come in and make a difference."



Dr Vasudev Makhija