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Giving a fresh start to people's lives

Usha Holla - Mumbai

Owing to their hectic schedule, doctors are usually left with little time to concentrate on things beyond their clinics or operating room. But a few of them manage to do something different within their domain. Dr Ashok Gupta is one of the very few who has mastered the art making his profession pleasurable and satisfying. An authority in microsurgery, Dr Gupta has been involved in conducting free reconstructive surgery for children and young adults, particularly from tribal areas, in the last two decades.

According to Dr Gupta, it was during his academic life at Oxford that he got impressed by surgeons who often traveled to peripheral hospitals to conduct operations for local people thus taking medical help to their doorstep. "Therefore on my return, I planned to do something on those lines. Subsequently in 1981, I began conducting free reconstructive surgery for the underprivileged.

It is a very expensive surgery. Therefore, for poor children and young adults with physical deformities, going for reconstructive surgery is impossible. By holding free camps for such people, we have been able to give 'fresh start' to their lives which they can lead with greater confidence and self image," he says.

Dr Gupta, along with philanthropists Dr Tekriwal and Mr. Singhanian, formed a Fresh Start Surgical Gifts chapter in India in October 2000. Recognising Dr Gupta's yeoman service in this area, US-based Fresh Start Surgical Gifts Inc. incorporated the Indian chapter in January 2001. Incidentally, it was the first international chapter of this organisation outside the US. The organisation works with the mission of extending benefits of advanced reconstructive surgery free of charge to underprivileged children, who suffer physical deformities caused by accidents, diseases or birth defects. Dr Gupta informed that the incidence of birth defects are more in tribal areas owing to large number of inter-community marriages as the communities are small and isolated.

Dr Gupta has been receiving good support from like-minded people from the medical field. Fresh Start Surgical Gifts team includes reconstructive surgeons, general surgeons, uro-surgeon, orthopaedic surgeons, neuro-surgeon, anaesthesiologists, nurses and a huge number of paramedical personnel, health workers and volunteers. Prior to any camp, a team of local doctors identify and select genuine cases that need surgery. Fresh Start provides the necessary pre-surgery assessment, required surgeries and postoperative follow up examinations and operations. Various kinds of surgeries are performed by Fresh Start team which include ear deformities, webbed fingers and extra digits, cleft lip, cleft palate, major birth defects, craniofacial anomalies and microsurgical reconstruction of intricate structures.

Amravati in Maharashtra and Ludhiana in Punjab are the two places where free camps are held on a regular basis. Around 50-60 surgeries are conducted in each camp. Complex cases are referred to Bombay Hospital where Dr Gupta is a consultant. Here too, the surgery is conducted free of cost. Fresh Start team has a number of unique cases to its credit.

For example. Razia, an 18-year old girl from Kutch was severely injured during last year's earthquake. The entire back of her leg was crushed and tore open from thigh to ankle. But after painstaking limb salvage microsurgery physical rehabilitation, the limb was saved without amputation. Further, in a rare case of congenital deformity, a girl had cleft of the face, nose and eye involving skull bones, brain, eye, nose and the face. It is said that its the only 9th of such case in the world and she is the only surviving victim of this deformity. Now Fresh Start team is sending her to US for specialised treatment.

Fresh Start movement depends largely on funds. And since the time his brainchild has tied up with the US body, fund-raising has become a bit easier, says Dr Gupta adding that it has also helped in getting quicker approvals for holding camps.

Now Dr Gupta is busy with final planning of a camp and a workshop for doctors to be held at Akola and Amravati regions in Maharashtra during Jan 4-6, 2002. "At the end of the day, it's the tremendous amount of satisfaction that motivates me to continue with my endeavour," Dr Gupta says. He also expects his peers and the society to contribute towards his noble cause by way of extending their expertise and funds, respectively.