

It's a small world

Local group helps the health of more than 1 million people in Nepal

By Paula Pant
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KATHMANDU, Nepal -- In this six-building, 100-bed hospital in a busy section of this city, all the florescent light bulbs have been removed to save energy costs. Latex gloves are used sparingly, pap smear swabs are sterilized for re-use, and medical files are stored on paper.

"I'm thinking of rigging the phones to automatically cut out after three minutes," says executive chairman Gupta Shrestha, 50. The city's provider charges by the minute.

For more than a decade, Shrestha has been the head of Helping Hands Community Hospital, a full-service operation started by the people of Boulder County. Like many others, he started his Helping Hands career as a volunteer. About 32 of the 40 doctors here, Shrestha says, are volunteers.

Shrestha keeps an examination table in his windowless office in a congested neighborhood in the capital of Nepal, a Himalayan nation poised as the buffer between China and India and home to eight of the world's 10 tallest mountains, including Mt. Everest.

A decade-long bloody communist insurgency, culminating in 2006 with the overthrow of the absolute monarch, has destabilized this nation, which is now ruled by a coalition government led by former Maoist rebels. The civil strife, combined with rampant corruption, lack of infrastructure and a tendency toward earthquakes and landslides have combined to make Nepal among the poorest and least developed countries in the world. It holds a 46 percent unemployment rate.

A line of patients is growing outside Shrestha's door, growing antsy. The volume of people with dirty faces and stained clothes multiplies rapidly, and their mutterings grow louder. They form, not a line, but a tight cluster around his door, and they seem to be elbowing to stand closest to the entry. Twice in five minutes someone raps on his door.

A gray-haired woman hunched over with severe stomach pain enters first and lies on the examination table without prompting. She couldn't be taller than 5 feet standing upright, but doubled over she seems much smaller. Deep lines etch her face. She looks relieved to be resting. Shrestha presses her abdomen and refers her for testing. She's out in less than two minutes.

Next comes Santosh Thapa, a 24-year-old farmer whose family scraped together the funds for an urgent flight to Kathmandu after his urinary tract closed. Thapa hands the doctor his x-ray.

"See this?" Shrestha says, pointing to what looks like a large Easter egg on the x-ray. "That's a bladder stone -- 10 centimeters by 5 centimeters." There are no patient privacy laws here.

Ninety-nine percent of stones larger than 6 millimeters need medical intervention.

He recommends Thapa have an operation, which costs the equivalent of \$100 at his hospital, as opposed to \$300 in Kathmandu's other private hospitals.

"Government hospitals are free," he says, "but they have waiting lists from six months to a year, and this man can't wait."

Two decades ago, Thapa might have been stuck on that waiting list. But thanks to Boulder's Helping Hands Health Education, he can get affordable care.

Helping Hands was launched by husband-and-wife team Narayan and Sreejana Shrestha, Nepalese-born entrepreneurs who have made Boulder their home since the early 1980s. Shortly after they settled here, Narayan led a group of tourists on a trek in the Nepalese countryside. The team, which happened to include several doctors and nurses, stumbled upon a child who had a stick protruding through his chin. The stick had been there for several weeks and had become severely infected.

The tourists helped the child. But everyone on the trek was disturbed by what they had seen.

Narayan vowed to bring a group of medically trained people to Nepal to set up a one-week mobile health clinic. To sustain the operation, the couple made a work-sharing agreement: Sreejana would stay in Boulder, managing their imports store, Old Tibet, at 948 Pearl St., which would also double as Helping Hands' headquarters. She'd also raise their three children. Narayan would spend as many as nine months a year in Nepal.

Seventeen years later, more than 1,000 doctors have provided low-cost treatment to more than 1 million patients. The Kathmandu hospital is the group's largest project and is one of the most advanced centers in the country, thanks to donations from Boulder Community Hospital and area clinics.

Helping Hands is sustained by people like Suzie Schneider, a 13-year resident of Longmont. When Schneider was 36, she made an abrupt life change by moving to Nepal as a Peace Corps volunteer. For three years, she made her home in the west-central Dang district.

There, Schneider witnessed the health effects of a lack of infrastructure. When her Nepalese coworkers' wife delivered a baby, she traveled to Kathmandu to do it.

"Having spent three years in Nepal, though not in a remote location, I did see enough of the conditions ... lack of nearby good water sources, lack of roads and transportation networks ... to know that much is needed," Schneider says.

She left Nepal in 1994, moved to Longmont, and began to get involved in Boulder County's fledging efforts to open a medical clinic in Nepal. At the time, Schneider says, there were questions about "whether a group of folks stateside could have any influence."

They squashed that doubt.

Within a decade, Helping Hands opened seven mobile health camps in seven villages and a small Kathmandu hospital that offered walk-in primary care.

Today that Kathmandu hospital has expanded to a six-building complex that includes almost every specialty service you can think of: a cardiovascular clinic, ob/gyn specialists, ophthalmology, physical therapy, psychiatry, surgery, internists, dermatology, dentistry, and ear, nose and throat specialists. The numbers show the impact. It treats 300 to 500 people per day, delivers 50 babies a month, reads 200 to 400 lab samples each day and is administering free tuberculosis treatment to 146 people.

"We have everything but neuro(logy)," says Deepak KC, a Helping Hands' international program manager and Nepalese man. "Hopefully we'll have that in a few months."

Santosh Thapa is now standing in the courtyard in the center of the Helping Hands complex, staring at his feet. He has not spoken a word since his arrival. He is alone, and he hasn't made eye contact with anyone. He doesn't look up when Shrestha strides toward him, grabs the x-ray from his hand and hoists it into the daylight it for two volunteers to examine. His face registers nothing when Shrestha describes how the bladder stone forces him to lean sideways to urinate.

But Thapa is lucky. He amassed enough money to get to the hospital quickly, and enough beyond that to pay for his treatment. Wealthy Nepalese earn \$100 a month; others earn that much per quarter. It seems a team of distant relatives is looking out for Thapa.

Helping Hands has now established more than 125 medical camps across the country. Last year it launched a 25-bed hospital the Dang district, the same area Schneider inhabited for three years.

The nonprofit receives no grant funding and has no dependable ongoing donors. Its expansion is credited to grassroots efforts from an enormous cadre of Boulder County supporters. The core team includes a Longmont doctor who sits on the organization's board and a Boulder accountant from Henry, Waters and Associates.

This local team procures not just cash. The Boulder Community Hospital donated delivery tables, two ventilators, an anesthesia machine and a baby warmer.

"The baby warmer helps in keeping (hypothermia) out of the newborn," says nursing director Bharati Sapkota. "In the cold season, baby can freeze."

The walls of this complex, like most buildings in Kathmandu, are made from cement and steel rods. The temperatures rarely dip below freezing in the winter, thanks to Nepal's positioning at the same latitude as Miami and Kathmandu's altitude of less than 5,000 feet above sea level. Yet lack of insulation ensures it's as cold inside as it is outside.

Helping Hands relies on Boulder County to send as much equipment as it can muster.

"We get equipment from Boulder like microscopes, wheelchairs and stretchers," says KC. "If we had to buy those, we couldn't."

Each 40-foot cargo crate of medical supplies holds goods valued between \$400,000 and one million dollars. Last year, Boulder's Rotary Club raised \$12,000 with matching grant money to cover shipping costs. Helping Hands added another \$4,000.

These in-kind donations cover some, but not all, needs. What can't be given must be purchased.

"We spent a lot of money to buy (electricity) converters," Gupta Shrestha says, nodding to the American plugs that mismatch Nepalese sockets.

Generators and batteries are pivotal in powering this equipment, as Kathmandu remains in the dark ages: the city suffers 126 hours a week without electricity.

Occasionally, Helping Hands must make a massive cash outlay for equipment its donors can't provide. Five years ago, the Boulder headquarters gave Shrestha \$10,000 for an ultrasound machine.

Some of this money comes from fees from women like Tracey Hui, 24, and Rumina Mirza, 23, both final-year medical students at University College in London who spent six weeks volunteering for Helping Hands last fall. They stumbled upon the organization online.

Though their fee was minimal --\$3,500 including airfare, room and board -- Helping Hands uses this net revenue, plus donations, to equip the hospital. The volunteers say this is a great investment in their education. At Helping Hands, they've confronted problems unheard of in their home countries.

"We see very late-stage cervical cancer we'd never see in London because of screening," Hui says.

Mirza recalls one woman who was 31 weeks pregnant coming for her first checkup. She refused the ultrasound because of the cost.

Though women are underrepresented in Nepal's workforce, they constitute a large percentage of Helping Hands' leadership. The female hospital administrator, Rukmani Karki, 47, keeps an up-to-the-minute account of everything transpiring in all six buildings of the hospital complex.

And the offices are filled with top-talent female doctors like obstetrics specialist Shilu Adhikari, 32, who treats about 20 women a day.

"I see a lot of hemorrhaging," says Adhikari. "It's the most common cause of maternal death. Most will bleed for 40 or 60 days and come to us with anemia."

While official maternal death rates are undocumented, infant mortality in Nepal is high, at 47 deaths per 1,000 births. The United States, by comparison, has six infant deaths per 1,000 births.

Powerful working women like Adhikari are a rarity in Nepal, in part because educational opportunities for women are thin. Many families have limited means and prefer to spend their money educating their sons. Only 35 percent of Nepalese adult women are literate, as opposed to 63 percent of adult men, according to the CIA.

Helping Hands is combating this by training local women to enter the medical field. In 2002, the group founded the Helping Hands Institute of Nursing, a Kathmandu nursing school predominately attended by women. It also launched the SANN Research Institute and International College and the Surya Boarding School.

Women hold leadership roles in these schools. Karuna KC, 40, serves as the administrative director of SANN and, from her first-floor office, interfaces daily with many of its students.

Kalpana Shrestha, vice-principal of Helping Hands Institute of Nursing, says she's watching a record number of graduates find jobs in Australia, Canada, England and the United States. She oversees 19 fourth-year students and 15 third-years -- all women -- and she expects 90 percent to launch careers overseas.

This prospect thrills third-year nursing student Deepa Giri, 21. She wants to help patients in Nepal, she says, but her knowledge feels stagnant in a country marred by persistent strikes, protests and blackouts.

"I can do better overseas," Giri says, in confident English. "And all my friends have moved to Australia."

As for why she wants to be a nurse?

She pauses.

"I don't know," she replies. "Destiny."

Learn more about Helping Hands, including volunteer opportunities, at www.helpinghandsusa.org.



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