Heartbreaking family tales spur medical student to help India

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Two oceans and 8,000 miles separate Noor Shaik from her grandmother in Bangalore, India. But neither distance nor a public health crisis can change her grandmother’s demeanor.

“With all that was going on, she was still herself—a genuinely adoring grandmother,” said Shaik, an AMA member and fourth-year medical student at Thomas Jefferson University’s Sidney Kimmel Medical College, in Philadelphia. “She was asking me about myself, even with how horrible things were there. That really broke me for some reason.”

That conversation motivated Shaik to act, working with an adviser and logistics contacts to get nearly two tons of badly needed medical supplies to India.

India in crisis

To hear Shaik’s grandmother tell it, nothing is the same as it was before the pandemic. For the second straight lockdown, she observed the Muslim holy period of Ramadan in isolation.

“From how she was describing it, she said things had not been the same for so long,” said Shaik, an AMA member. “The whole city is quiet. Not a single bird is making a sound. Having been there her whole life, she described how unusual and discomfiting it was to her.”

Shaik’s immediate family in India had been mostly spared from contracting COVID-19, but many of her extended family members had acquired the virus—as had nearly 30 million Indians. The virus’ death toll at this article’s deadline was more than 375,000 and the patient volume is overloading health systems.

“Some of the stories we were reading were really heartbreaking,” Shaik said of a conversation with a family member. That family member spoke of attending a funeral and “every 15 or 20 minutes an ambulance would bring a new body. They were all lined up in a
row. This is just one cemetery in one small part of a city. The images that she was painting were terrifying.”

Noting the rise in COVID-19 illnesses and deaths in India, Brazil, Argentina and many other nations, the AMA continues to “urge global collaboration in the fight against this virus—providing vaccines and medical supplies that will help diminish the humanitarian crisis that we are seeing throughout the world,” AMA President Susan R. Bailey, MD, said in May.

The AMA continues to support and “will facilitate coordination amongst the U.S. government, the United Nations, World Health Organization, World Medical Association and other partners in responding to the global pandemic, which will continue to be of international concern for the foreseeable future.”

Filling needs

When Wayne Bond Lau, MD, her academic adviser at Jefferson, asked about the possibility of collecting supplies to send to India, the topic wasn’t even the primary subject of Shaik’s email. She certainly didn’t expect that in a month’s time, a 900-pound shipment of much-needed personal protective equipment (PPE) would be arriving in Bangalore.

Lau reached out to Anthony Moscatelli, Associate VP of Jefferson’s supply chain who was able to come up with vital supplies such as N95 masks and hospital gowns. Other medical contacts reached out to Shaik soon thereafter and also donated additional PPE along with tracheostomy and catheter suction kits, nasal cannulas, and tubing for oxygen. Another logistics vendor, Dimerco Express, offered to ship the supplies across the globe free of charge for the first shipment and reduced cost for subsequent shipments.

The supply load was too large for Shaik’s dorm, and had to be moved to her parents’ home in Bensalem, Pennsylvania.

“It was a small request that has now grown into something I couldn’t envision,” she said. “The lesson I take away is people shouldn’t be afraid to ask for assistance. If you have a goal, reach out to those around you. You might connect with a network of amazing people.”

A second shipment that includes oxygen concentrators and additional PPE has arrived in India, with a third one to follow in the coming weeks. Shaik hopes to continue sending supplies—and raise funds—as long as the pandemic persists. India is struggling mightily to get its population vaccinated.

“I hope that we are able to make a positive impact on people’s lives,” Shaik said. “We are trying to help alleviate the pain and suffering over there. I hope we are able to make even a small dent in what...
is going on.”

The AMA has curated a selection of resources to help residents, medical students and faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic to help manage the shifting timelines, cancellations and adjustments to testing, rotations and other events at this time.