Local doctor uses golden years to advocate for native health issues

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When most of us think about our golden years we think of time to relax, or spare time to delve into hobbies we’ve always loved. But 76-year-old Dr. Chandrakant Shah is advocating for aboriginal health issues and has spearheaded a campaign to educate frontline health workers with his Aboriginal Cultural Safety Initiative.

The genial, vivacious doctor recounts stories of his life’s great triumphs with a humbleness reminiscent of Forest Gump. Great victories like in 1994 when he rallied political support to have the Citizenship Guide’s section on First Nations amended to expand beyond the brief summary provided. Or his groundbreaking research into Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder’s long term effects, research that is helping to establish testing for adults who may have suffered from fetal alcohol syndrome and were never diagnosed.

In 1996, then a professor at the University of Toronto’s department of preventative medicine and biostatistics, Dr. Shah was doing outreach work with the homeless and was invited to work half days at Anishnawbe Health Toronto, a health care service centre aimed at providing health and holistic services to the expansive aboriginal community of Toronto; the largest of its kind in Canada.

It was while working at the university that Dr. Shah began his advocacy career.

“There are 26 isolated communities that the University of Toronto medical staff used to go to on a rotational basis once a year, Shah said. “I got my interest sparked through that, I began to go twice a year, then three times a year and because of my interest, and research into advocacy work I got more into it.”

The doctor takes a globalist approach to medicine when treating his patients.

“When I treat in the Western framework I have a holistic framework in my mind,” Dr. Shah said “Aboriginal health talks about the health and holistic as a circle, within that are four quadrants.”

His latest advocacy endeavour is to reinvent the relationship between healthcare providers and their aboriginal patients. While working at Anishnawbe Health Dr. Shah has been appalled by stories of his patients encounters with medical professionals.
“My patients sometimes come to me crying. There was a woman who was about 50 or 60. She told me she was having symptoms of an early stroke — her speech was slurred, her face got slightly distorted, she was a bit wobbly and so forth.” Shah said. “She went to an emergency room in Toronto and she was treated like a ‘drunken Indian’ and sent home. She was sent home twice from different emergency rooms. Finally one of her white friends took her and pleaded for her care, and she had, had a stroke.”

Stories like this one inspired the social advocate to create a program that will teach sensitivity and empathy. The Aboriginal Safety Initiative was born to combat these stereotypes while educating students about the rich history and diversity among the various First Nations and aboriginal communities.

Through his research Dr. Shah discovered that Ontario has 62 institutions that provide frontline health care training with approximately 57,000 students registered in various programs.

“We found that 95 per cent of Colleges excluding one, Mohawk College had no program at all, and 85 per cent of universities had no program to train frontline health workers,” he said.

Dr. Shah with funding from the Trillium Foundation and the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, then developed a loose framework that combined theoretical training laid out by the Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada, with experience testimony provided by aboriginal people first hand.

“I decided that we need to train aboriginal people to tell their own story rather than the pseudo-expert talking about their story, because I’ve always believed that you have to put your heart and soul into this kind of work.”

The Aboriginal Cultural Safety Initiative is now in its second year and Dr. Shah boasts that he is getting great feedback from students, professors and administrators.

“This one of the most unique programs in the whole country,” he said.

Dr. Shah believes that a key component to ending the disenfranchisement and marginalization of aboriginals is to work with them in developing a sense of cultural esteem.

“If I could do one thing it would be to make sure they [aboriginal people] regain their identity, they regain their self esteem,” Dr. Shah said.

Action Items:

1. Take one of the holistic health classes at the Anishnawbe Health centre

2. Learn more about the First Nations and aboriginal communities in your city

3. Volunteer with an organization that does community outreach

4. Take an issue you are passionate about and educate those around you about it