

Coast doctor rebuilds lives



MEDICAL MIRACLES... Gold Coast plastic surgeon Dr Dilip Gahankari consults a patient in India.

Surgery for India's poor

By LAURA NELSON

PLASTIC surgeon Dilip Gahankari has returned from India where he operated on some of the most severely disfigured, disadvantaged people in the vast country.

Dr Gahankari, of Southport, specialises in birth defects, trauma and reconstructive surgery.

During his mission to India, he and a team of medical professionals operated in the town of Shegaon on patients from the impoverished Melghat area.

Dr Gahankari said people there had almost no access to modern medical and surgical facilities.

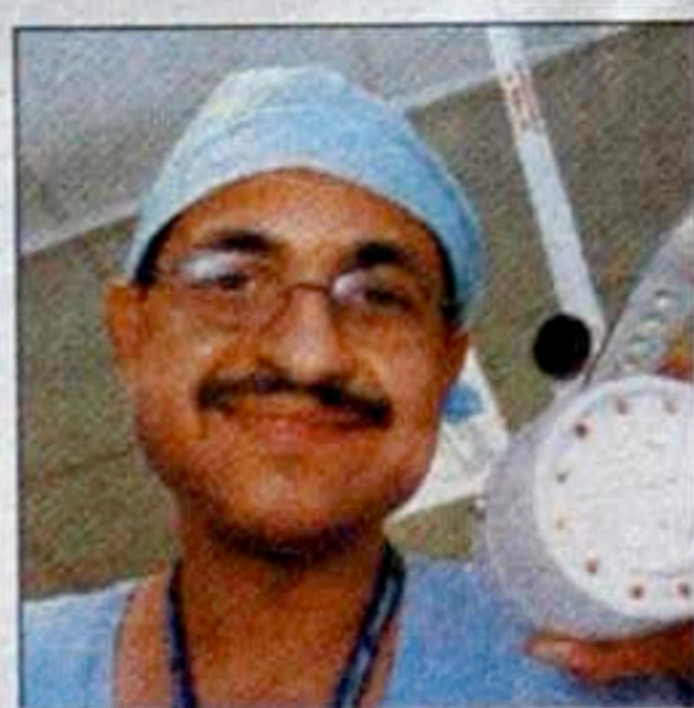
"A relatively large number of patients from this area carry birth defects," he said.

"Common customs such as marriage within families, nutritional deficits, a high incidence of alcohol and smoking, and the side-effects of tribal home-herbal-remedies are the probable causes of these maladies."

Long-term deformities are common.

"Burn injuries are also common in households as a result of unsafe practices with kerosene lamps and open fireplaces for cooking," he said.

"Winter is quite harsh and the houses are no more than straw huts which provide very little



Dr Gahankari

protection against the elements.

"The incidence of burn injuries in young children is high, simply because toddlers are often looked after by their siblings who are only a few years older than they are."

The surgical team was supported by 20 health and social workers from Melghat.

"There were many other people who helped and some friends who are proficient in computers helped design the database for patient records," he said.

"Others helped enter data and prepared operating lists."

A total of 47 patients underwent surgery and Dr Gahankari performed 40 operations including on cleft palates, severe burns of the hand and neck, congenital hand deformities (extra fingers, thumbs), skin tumours and cysts.

Eyelid skin cancers were removed by reconstructing eyelids, and patients with major and facial scars were treated.

Dr Gahankari said the

work was 'intensive, yet rewarding'.

He said it involved hours in theatre doing 'incredibly precise work' which would benefit a small child or an adult and lead to a better quality of life.

The surgery also enabled patients to marry, work and not be the objects of ridicule.

"That makes it all worth it," he said.

Dr Gahankari will visit India once a year, as well as other countries such as East Timor, as a volunteer.

He also works with Rotary Australia's local medical initiative ROMAC to provide medical treatment for children from developing countries in the form of life-saving and dignity-restoring surgery.

"There is so much suffering in the third world, as well as here at home," he said, referring to the many cancer, trauma and birth defect patients he sees in southeast Queensland.

"Those who have the skills and the privilege of working in this field have a responsibility to give something back to their community."

Dr Gahankari visits the Gold Coast and Royal Brisbane hospitals as a visiting medical officer and has a private practice at Benowa.

He teaches undergraduate medical students at the University of Queensland.