

THE DOCTOR IS IN



JOHN O'BOYLE/THE STAR-LEDGER

Dr. Shahid Aziz, right, performs cleft palate surgery recently at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey.

A world of good half a world away

Surgeon leads team on special mission

BY CANDICE LEIGH HELFAND
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

For Dr. Shahid R. Aziz, helping others is worth traveling to the other side of the world.

Aziz, of Mountainside, along with eight other medical professionals, depart Saturday for Bangladesh, where they will perform 60 to 70 cleft lip and cleft palate surgeries, as well as teach local surgeons how to perform the procedures.

After two days traveling, the team will arrive in Chuadanga, located near the India-Bangla-

desh border, to assess the cases for surgery.

Aziz, an associate professor in the Department of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery and Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, is the team's leader, with years of cleft mission experience.

"Our first trips were down to Ecuador, but a couple years ago, we noticed we were treating less and less patients," he said. "Basically, it's a very safe country that's easy to get to, and almost

every week of the year they were having American cleft surgeons there on mission trips, creating less and less of a need."

Aziz, a Bengali man with family still residing in rural Bangladesh, used his extensive family contacts to work out a mission with Impact Foundation, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization whose sole purpose is to make available cures for correctable deformities.

According to Aziz, the need for cleft surgeries in Bangladesh is dire.

"In Bangladesh, there are about 150 million people, and one in every 1,000 births have a

cleft deformity — that's about 150,000 cases," he said. "And there's only 10 surgeons in the entire country who know how to do the operation."

Cleft lips and palates are genetic birth defects involving a lack of fusion — in a cleft lip, the upper lip is not fused together, while a cleft palate, or roof of the mouth, has a hole in it.

Though the cleft lip is primarily an aesthetic problem, a cleft palate causes speech problems and affects a child's ability to eat.

"And in relation to the aesthetic problem, rural Bangla-

[See **CLEFT**, Page 31]

CLEFT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 27

Mountainside M.D. doing world of good

desh has a traditional society with arranged marriages, and as a result, many affected people are unable to function socially," Aziz added.

So Aziz and a small crew made their first trip to Bangladesh in January 2006 for a one-week stay.

But due to the limited amount of time left for work after extensive travel, the team was only able to treat 30 cases — this year, the team is planning a 12-day journey.

Fran Devonshire of Berkeley Heights is a veteran of Aziz's cleft missions. An oral surgery nurse at UMDNJ, she feels the importance of the team's work.

"We have so much here compared to what other folks have — it's a very humbling experience to go to a culture like that, where they have to worry about having food for another meal," she said.

George Sandau of Bloomfield is one of two chief residents on the oral and maxillofacial surgery team at UMDNJ who is going on the mission, and he is honored to be part of Aziz's team.

"It's our responsibility as doctors to help children and their families," he said. "I'm a new father . . . I have an 11-month-old daughter, Brianna, and I can only imagine the

grief and sadness I'd feel if my daughter had such a deformity — we have to go on this mission."

The trip is funded by annual grants from Smile Train and other corporate foundation education grants such as KLS Martin Inc. and Stryker Leibinger Inc., which donate necessary equipment to a United States umbrella sponsor, Healing the Children Northeast Inc.

Aziz pointed out that whatever is not covered by sponsorship and other fundraising efforts is paid out of pocket by those on the mission.

"It's all volunteer work and fundraising," he said. "The participants even use personal vacation time, and have to take time away from their families."

Devonshire says it's a small price to pay.

"It's a long trip, sure, but it's worth it," she said.

As for the future, Aziz said he's in tentative talks about a Palestinian Children's Relief Fund, which would send him to the Gaza Strip at the end of May.

"They're trying to develop U.S.-based groups to go there and do some cleft surgery," he said. "I have safety concerns . . . since it's a very dangerous, volatile part of the world — but if there's a need and I can do something, I want to."

Candice Leigh Helfand can be reached at (908) 302-1503 or chelfand@starledger.com.