



Man with a big heart: O P Khanna of the Needy Heart Foundation.

Heartfelt medical care for the needy

The Needy Heart Foundation is making heart care facilities available to the poor, finds Shwetal Kamalapurkar.

Home is where the heart is. Many believe this and yet, few expound its truth. Fewer choose to quit those green bills to take on the role of an angel in the lives of others. And, there are still lesser numbers who pursue the dreams that are suppressed at the bottom of their hearts with passion and vigour.

Yet, in today's fast moving, materialistic world, there are those who follow their dreams. O P Khanna is one such example. Khanna, quit a fat pay packet amounting to a whopping sum of Rs four lakh per month to "follow my dream" he says. His dream was to bring quality medical treatment to the poor and needy

"I observed that the corporate world was giving its employees the best medical facilities possible but, the poor did not have this. They could not reap the benefits of advances in medical science," he says, talking about his dream.

It was when he was back from the UN for a short visit that he and some of his doctor friends came up with the idea of setting up a foundation which would provide cardiac care for the poor. Thus, in 2001 the Needy Heart Foundation (NHF) was set up.

The founding members of NHF include Dr R C Sriviyas, Dr Joseph Xavier and Dr N S Devanand, renowned heart surgeons; S Ramaiah, a Char-

tered Accountant; Rajendra Kotaria, an Industrialist and Khanna. It's the staunch love for the cause that has ensured the rapid growth of NHF.

NHF provides help to poor patients who cannot afford surgery at cardiac hospitals. India is in the middle of a coronary artery disease epidemic Khanna asserts.

"The cost of heart surgery is so high that the poor prefer to die a painful death," he adds. "We are here to tell people that there is hope, we care for your heart," he says. The statistics he put forth are disturbing:

- Over ten per cent of urban Indians suffer from heart-related diseases
- Annually, over 1.4 million Indians require critical heart surgery. At present, however, only about 55,000 surgeries are performed.
- In India alone, a little over 1,50,000 children born annually are diagnosed with congenital heart disease.

With this being the situation, the task before the NHF was Herculean. They first had to identify such needy patients, win their trust, identify doctors who would be willing to work for such a cause, find donors for the surgery and equipment.

It was the unshakable belief in the cause that kept the group together and enabled them to make a beginning. To encourage donations, the

foundation created complete transparency in its accounts and thus ensured the donors that the amount received by way of donations was utilised effectively. In the last four years, NHF has received donations amounting to Rs 150 lakh.

The amount however, "is still less since the cost of a conventional heart by-pass surgery varies between Rs 75,000 and Rs 2 lakh in addition to the cost of pacemakers and other specialised equipment," says Khanna. To cut the costs, they evolved a strategy whereby heart surgeons do not charge operation fees from the poor.

In just four years, NHF has organised heart surgeries for over three hundred patients, provided 32 pacemakers free of charge and reached out to various remote villages to identify the needy and provide them with appropriate cardiac care.

Most of the patients treated come from Karnataka, TN, Bangladesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. Of the 170 patients treated last year, 96 were children.

The foundation plans to reach out to other rural areas with the help of NGOs and identify patients who need help.

It has not been an easy road to tread but it was the strong belief that "nobody should die when a disease is treatable" that has kept the group going.

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