

Aberdeen American News (SD)

1. September 4, 2001

PLASTIC SURGEON FINDS ABERDEEN GOOD FIT FOR NEW PRACTICE

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Dr. Sanjay Mukerji is adding to Aberdeen's list of firsts. He is the first and only full-time plastic surgeon in Aberdeen. Arriving from the East Coast, he has been in Aberdeen since July.

Aberdeen has also provided the India native with plenty of firsts: the large, vast night sky, being able to leave his car unlocked, and people who sell sweet corn on street corners.

While there are pros and cons to every place, many pros about the Hub City jump out at Mukerji. He likes the fact that it is easy to park in Aberdeen and that there is virtually no traffic. He enjoys his daily commute as it only takes a few minutes.

Roads very easy: Mukerji said he cannot get over how straight the roads are. "Sometimes I think I may fall asleep driving because there are no curves or turns."

A Midwest winter does not scare him so much as he already had a taste of it in February when he was visiting Aberdeen. "The thing people have to remember is that living in a smaller community instead of a big city like New York or Chicago is that you can drive up to where you need to go instead of walking everywhere," he said.

Aberdeen reminds Mukerji of the rural community he grew up in near the Himalaya Mountains in India.

Diverse education: The board-certified general surgeon and board-eligible plastic surgeon graduated from All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi, India. He completed residencies in general surgery at Our Lady of Mercy Medical Center and Lincoln Medical and Mental Health Center in the Bronx. His plastic surgery residency was done at George Washington University Medical Center in Washington, D.C., where he also was an assistant professor in the plastic surgery division for a year.

His interest in plastic surgery has its roots in his homeland. He said chewing tobacco is popular and results in a lot of head and neck cancers. When the cancers are removed, the patients are left with defects. "It's challenging to reconstruct," he said.

No two alike: Mukerji likes a challenge, and enjoys the challenge plastic surgery offers. "No two cases are alike because no two people are alike," he said. He explained that each surgery is tailored to the individual, which means he needs to think on his feet.

Mukerji has not been as busy as expected. He is making plans to have outreach clinics in Pierre

and Redfield.

Since plastic surgery is so specialized, Mukerji said there needs to be a population base of at least 40,000 people. "There is three or four times that in Aberdeen and the surrounding communities," he said.

Not only was Mukerji looking for a small community to build his practice in, Avera St. Luke's was looking for a full-time plastic surgeon. The two sort of stumbled upon each other.

Good fit: "We think it's an important specialty," said Patty Kirkpatrick, director of public relations for Avera St. Luke's. "In addition to cosmetic surgeries, our surgery department is also excited to have him on board for a variety of reconstructive services which can be life changing."

"I wanted a place where I could be independent and have a solo practice," Mukerji said.

Cosmetic vs. reconstructive: Mukerji believes plastic surgery isn't just about appearance and looks. He does a lot of surgery for breast reconstruction after a mastectomy, and also surgery for people with skin cancers.

When a person wants to have plastic surgery for cosmetic purposes, Mukerji will take pictures from all angles, blow the photographs up and talk with the patient about what they are unhappy about. Mukerji will explain what he can do to "fix" it, and what the likely outcome will be.

"People need to remember we're working with living tissues and modifying them," he said. "I can't satisfy someone who says 'I want to look like Julia Roberts.' "

"There are a lot of variables associated with surgery," he said. "That's why you can't always do it by the numbers."

He said liposuction, breast augmentation and eye-lids are the most popular cosmetic surgeries. Each costs about \$3,000 to \$4,000. He said male plastic surgery patients are increasing, particularly with liposuction and reduction of enlarged male breasts.

Still growing? Wait. Mukerji believes that unless a teen has a congenital deformation or something that is inhibiting social development, he does not agree with him or her having plastic surgery. "If it's something that relates to appearance, they need to complete their maturity growth curve first," Mukerji said. "That feature (they want to change) may either decrease or exaggerate as they get older."

Of course, there are exceptions. But if someone is under 18, Mukerji will advise them to wait.

"Surprisingly a lot of the times it's the parents that are encouraging it," he said.

Mukerji wants to remind people that plastic surgery is still surgery and there are risks associated with it. "It's important to weigh the benefits against the risks," he said.

"I like to think of surgery as a last resort," Mukerji said. "The person should have exhausted all other efforts."

Overseas work: There's a need in underdeveloped countries for plastic surgeons, Mukerji said. He tries to spend two to three weeks a year in Ecuador with the Children of the Andes project. There are about 70 youth, ages 18 and 19, who are seen by volunteer doctors for surgeries. Most of them need surgery for cleft palettes. "Many times all they need is one surgery to correct it," Mukerji said, "and it's cost effective."

Eventually Mukerji would like to set up a similar program in India. He said it will take two to three years to do that since there has not been a program in his homeland before.

When he is not working, Mukerji enjoys photography, sketching, painting, poetry, biking and hiking. Although he has never been hunting or ice fishing, Mukerji said he is in favor of new experiences. He would also like to see the Black Hills.

Dr. Mukerji's office is in the Physicians Plaza building, 201 S. Lloyd St., and he can be reached at (605) 725-2772.