



At 73, award-winning Desai fights for doctors' rights

Veteran OB-GYN says she can't rest

By **MEERA RAJAGOPALAN**
INDIA New England Staff

WEST SPRINGFIELD, Mass. — Imagine writing the medical board certification exam once. Now imagine doing it three times, all in different countries and spending a total of 16 years on medical education. Would you be tired?

Not Dr. Veena Balvantrai Desai. Now 73 (“and a half”, she corrects), Desai, the two time winner of the Republican Senatorial Medal of Freedom and the winner of the 2004 Congressional Order of Merit, is still active. This time, as president of the Western Massachusetts OB-GYN Society, she is fighting for doctors’ rights.

Colleagues Dr. James Wang Dr. Ruth Pryor are amazed. “She seems to have an endless supply of energy,” says Wang. “Young obstetrician and gynecologists are suffering due to high liability insurance,” says Desai, a grandmother of two. “There are women traveling for 70 miles to deliver their babies, because people don’t want to be OB-GYNS anymore.”

Desai led a delegation of doctors to Washington D.C. in late April to urge Congress to reform liability laws for doctors. She has tirelessly written to numerous senators and congressional representatives soliciting their support for the cause.

Desai now consults at Bay State and Mercy medical centers, and volunteers her services at a clinic for under-served women called Caring Health Center, all in Springfield, Mass., though

she is slowly tapering down her own practice.

Desai has won several commendations and awards over the years, including the International Peace Prize from the United Cultural Convention.

“I do feel happy about the awards. It is a great sense of fulfillment that a tiny lady like myself has been searched out and my services recognized,” she says.



Desai

Born during turbulent times in India, Desai is the daughter of a physician and freedom fighter who suffered injuries during Mahatma Gandhi’s Salt Satyagraha in 1930. He never fully recovered, passing away when Desai was merely nine.

“I can hardly feed and clothe you, how am I going to school you?” Desai remembers her mother asking her then. Desai took top honors at her school, and received a scholarship to study medicine. She remembers the tough times. “I had just two sets of clothes, and if it was raining, I often had to wear a wet dress,” she reminisces.

Desai tutored children, and along with her merit scholarship, she kept herself going. She would weave cotton thread using a chakra (wheel), and would get it made into cloth.

After her medical degree in obstetrics and gynecology, she was determined to continue her education. She moved to England in 1962, where she landed a job in general surgery at the War Memorial Hospital in Sale, U.K.

Here, she had some hands-on experience, but had to write her medical exams all over again. It

took her a residency of three years as well as two years of writing exams for her to be certified as a doctor in England in 1966.

Before leaving for England, she met Vinay Gandevia, her future husband. They went to the same school, and Gandevia says he knew this was his woman even then. Now 80, Gandevia says, “We never told each other ‘I love you’ or anything. There was an unspoken devotion between us.”

Gandevia had also come to London to seek his fortunes and Desai and Gandevia tied the knot, albeit without her family’s consent. Desai kept her maiden name, starting a tradition in the family. After their son Vijay was born, they still had an uncertain future in England.

“It wasn’t like it is now. There was a lot of racial bias, and we were second class citizens there,” says Desai, explaining her decision to migrate to the United States in 1973. Desai underwent one more year of residency at the Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, Canada and passed the American Board certification exam.

“I had to write these exams for the third time—I was 44 years old now,” she says. After she received her certification, the family moved to Portsmouth, N.H., where Desai set up her own private practice. Her philanthropic bent of mind blossomed in the United States, and she lobbied for and established a free pre-natal clinic for under-served women. Established in 1984 in Portsmouth, the clinic is still going strong.

Earlier, in 1972, she had set up the OB-GYN department at the Mission Hospital in Mysore, India, through an organization called “War on Want.”

Moving to California, Desai established herself there as a person with strong social ties. The first woman Rotary Club president of Buena

Park, Calif., she initiated a program called “Women in Need” for women who were abused, or had social and psychological needs.

She also served as a police surgeon to law enforcement agencies and served the public health department in Suffolk County, N.Y.

Says Pryor, “She has been a wonderful addition to this town. She is very involved in the medical community, and helped restart the [OB-GYN] society in a big way.”

Desai is a veteran in the medical field as well, being one of the first doctors to send a man into his wife’s labor room in 1956. As a student in 1960, she also wrote a thesis on subsequent deliveries of women who already had one Caesarian section. She concluded that it was possible for these women to deliver a baby vaginally, a revolutionary idea at that time.

Desai and Gandevia moved to West Springfield, Mass. when they wanted to be with their son Dr. Vijay Gandevia, a physician, his wife Vandana Joshi and their children, Leena, 8 and Seema, 6. “I had to choose between sunshine and son-shine, and chose the latter,” says Desai with a smile.

She credits her success to the two most important men in her life. “I get my drive from my father, but I receive all the support of my work from my husband,” says Desai. Gandevia, for his part, is happy to stay out of the limelight; he is an American board-certified psychotherapist and sexologist, finishing his pre-doctorate thesis from University of New Hampshire at 53.

“She is an amazing woman, who handles everything from cooking to cancer surgery with ease,” he gushes.

As for Desai, she feels she still has business to take care of, referring to her fight against doctors’ high liability insurance. She says simply, “Now is not the time to rest.”