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## Pakistani doctors in Chicago offer free community healthcare

Saman Sheikh | DAWN.COM | 7 hours ago



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Pakistani Doctor Aftab Khan listens to patient Shahida Farooq at the APPNA/PPS clinic for South Asian community in Chicago – Photo by Saman Sheikh for Dawn.com

**Shahida Farooq – in her traditional *shalwar kameez* and *chadar* – bares her right arm for the physician to examine her swollen joints, which are diagnosed to carry a form of arthritis. She jokes that in her hometown of Karachi she has help around the house but here, she is the ‘*maasi*,’ maid herself. I ask her why, then, did she leave that life behind to be here in Chicago, wishing soon after that I had not.**

A few months ago, her son was shot while working at a convenience store and the right side of his body was left paralysed. With glistening eyes, this strong breast cancer survivor breaks down as she recounts

that she moved to the US to be with her son. His young wife, also here with her mother-in-law, stands beside her patiently. They drove almost an hour to the only **clinic** that provides free-of-cost premier healthcare to members of the community who have no health insurance.

The **Pakistani Descent Physician Society of Illinois (PPS)**, under the umbrella of the **Association of Physicians of Pakistani Descent of North America (APPNA)**, opened this free health clinic in 2009. APPNA, which has been in operation for 35 years, is headquartered in the Chicago suburb of Westmont, Illinois and has brought together motivated doctors sprinkled throughout the United States to volunteer at free clinics, perform charitable acts, and has also provided assistance in times of dire emergencies when natural disasters hit both the US and Pakistan.

As you drive away from the shimmering city of Chicago with gleaming towers of glass and concrete, the bluest waters of Lake Michigan and the America you see in the movies, some of the bitter truths of living in this country hit you like the wind on a cold, blustery day.

The scenic views of the third largest city in the country left behind, you reach the suburban town of Westmont, a few miles south of Chicago. Here you will find a diverse population of various ethnic backgrounds living side by side, taking advantage of this APPNA centre.

Open on Saturdays due to its nature of being run by volunteer physicians, medical students and community members who have other responsibilities during the week, the clinic caters to about 25 patients on a given day in the four hours it is open. With an increasing demand from the patients, PPS hopes to gain more support to start a mobile clinic and also begin providing services on Wednesdays in the future.

As I walked in, I was pleasantly surprised by the set up and warmth that emanated from the people and surroundings. Uzma and Afia, young student volunteers greet you at the reception with an eagerness to be helpful. Most of the volunteers are from Pakistan but there are some friendly faces from India and the US – all genuinely happy to contribute to this cause.

Clinics are no fun place to be, but as a smiling patient Tasneem Abbasi commends, he is highly satisfied with the treatment but also especially comfortable because he can speak to the doctors in Urdu. An environment of culturally infused respect and mannerisms, it was like walking into a family gathering. I happened to catch Dr Rizwan Farooqi, their coordinator and physician, crouching on the floor, holding the feet of an elderly patient.



Volunteers working at the Pakistani Descent Physician Society of Illinois clinic in Westmont, Chicago Area – Photo by Saman Sheikh for Dawn.com

The clinic is open to all and not just the South Asian community of whom approximately 40 per cent are without health insurance. While, almost a fifth of the entire population lives without it and has to rely on government-assisted methods or do without proper healthcare altogether.

Dr Aftab Khan, who stayed on his feet the entire time, running from patient to patient, explained most of the processes and workings of the clinic. In simple terms, you need insurance to receive medical care to balance the cost of treatment, since without insurance, those costs are ludicrously unaffordable. Prescribed medication and doctors' visits alone cost thousands of dollars which no one can afford without health insurance.

Hence, the average cost of insurance for one family of four can easily be around \$1,600 a month, which does not even begin to cover the cost of treatment and medicines.

PPS, with its network of providers alone is rendering services worth \$250 million a year to needy patients. In America, the medical process is complicated and procedures are to be followed strictly. PPS helps, not only with initial consultation, tests and analyses, but also finds specialised care when needed.

In Pakistan, there is a different set of problems people deal with when it comes to healthcare, but they are mostly oblivious to the issues faced by many here, as Nusrat Jehan, a patient points out. She is another one of those countless elderly parents who join their children in the US and face adjustments of all sorts – especially the challenges associated with receiving regular medical attention.

These are legal immigrants whose children may be insured through their employers but cannot afford high costs of insurance policies for their parents which increase exponentially with age. Having health insurance has, sometimes, nothing to do with your income level. It can be very expensive depending on your age, place of employment and medical needs. Of course, it is another sad story when it comes to those without legal documentation or support from families.

This APPNA initiative, led by Dr Imtiaz Arain has transcended to other cities within the country has proven to be a step in the right direction. The clinic runs mainly on support from doctors in the US who have helped Pakistan earn the title of being a generous nation in the country, with their continued dedication and philanthropic efforts. It is time that more people devoted their attention to this issue and reached out to support this cause.

In his opinion, Dr Khan believes there should be such clinics available every few miles.

There are other free clinics but very few notable organisations serving South Asians in the Chicago area, who are the second largest in population after New York within the US.

The **Indian American Medical Association Charitable Foundation Clinic** is one such destination, commonly known as the **Devon Clinic**, where medical students from Northwestern University work with community physicians, residents, and students from other Chicago medical schools to help provide health care to uninsured and under-served patients.

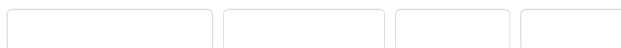
The South Asian Medical Students from the University of Illinois (SAMSA) are also providing quality health care and health education to South Asians in the community. **SAMSA** has a partnership with the **Indian American Medical Association (IAMA)**, who help build connections amongst medical professionals and students across the entire city to volunteer at free clinics in the multi-ethnic neighbourhood surrounding Devon Avenue in Chicago.

For Dr Khan, the paid work he does during the week does not come close to the satisfaction he feels when a patient thanks him at the end of a consultation.

Shahida, wipes her tears as she gets up to leave the office, turns to Dr Khan and gives him a 'dua,' a simple prayer while thanking him.

*Saman Sheikh is a journalist based in Chicago.*

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September 26, 2012 2:56 pm

Great job,pakistan zaindabad

Great job Khan

