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\$1M Grant for World's First So. Asian Heart Center

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After years of talk about the alarmingly higher rate at which South Asians are vulnerable to heart disease, a Silicon Valley hospital has decided to do something about it, and a Bay Area philanthropist's \$1 million donation will give it added momentum, hospital officials told **India-West**.

Los Altos Hills resident Malini Alles, founder of Stree: Global Investments for Women Foundation, has donated \$1 million to the South Asian Heart Center, to be located at Mountain View's El Camino Hospital. The center will be the first organization in the world to address the high incidence of coronary artery disease among South Asians. Alles' donation is the first major gift received by the center.

"The million dollar gift gives a real momentum to the center and credibility to the center," hospital vice president Jon Friedenber told **India-West**. "Our hope is that other leaders in the community will see that and say, 'Gee, maybe I should take a look at it and see if this is something that I should be supporting.'"

South Asians living abroad have a significantly higher incidence of coronary artery disease, a type of heart ailment resulting from the narrowing of the blood vessels supplying blood to the heart, and the increased risk appears to be as high as two to four times. South Asians in the United States and in urban India suffer heart attacks at an earlier age, often without prior symptoms or warning. A study among Indian men showed that half of all heart attacks in this population occur under the age of 50 years, and 25 percent under the age of 40. This holds true even for lifelong vegetarians, who do not smoke, and are not overweight.

The South Asian Heart Center at El Camino Hospital is the first center in North America focused on reducing the alarming rate of heart disease among South Asians.

"I think it's an extremely good project that they are undertaking," said Dr. Enas Enas, a Chicago-based cardiologist who has done path breaking research on coronary artery disease in South Asians. "I expect in a few more years centers like this springing up in different parts of the United States."

Enas, who is director of the Coronary Artery Disease among Indians Research Foundation and is also on the center's advisory board, said it is now well known that Indians and other South Asians have a far greater risk of heart disease. "We've found that Indians have at least four-fold rates of heart disease," he said. In other countries it is

maybe two times or 50 percent higher, in the U.S. it is four times higher. Indians need to be examined differently and treated differently.”

Yet the awareness has produced little tangible result until now, he said. “Indians have come to be more aware of the higher rate of heart disease,” he said. “And we have been talking and talking and talking. Nothing is being done about it. So I am very, very pleased about the center.”

The South Asian Heart Center is a pioneering wellness program that will educate clients and physicians on research, tests, and treatments unique to the South Asian community. Friedenberg explained the various ways in which the center would work.

“First, there’s going to be community awareness. We want to work with existing organizations within the South Asian community, community centers, temples and so on to disseminate information and try and empower people within the South Asian community with knowledge,” he explained to **India-West**. “Second, we want to try and do significant physician outreach to change the way the physicians relate to their South Asian patients.

“Most physicians are treating South Asian patients the same way they are treating rest of their patients as it relates to coronary artery disease.”

A change of approach was vital for physicians, he said, because heart disease affects South Asians differently.

“Coronary artery disease is not unique to South Asians; what’s unique is the very, very high rate and the age at which South Asians become symptomatic of coronary artery disease,” he said. “You have huge numbers (of South Asians) relative to the rest of the population of people in their 40s and 50s who are dropping dead of a heart attack relative to non-South Asians. And in fact, in a very significant number, the first symptoms that they experience of any kind of problem with their heart is a fatal heart attack. If you look at the rates of fatal cardiac events among South Asians under 50, it’s 12 times the predicted rates based on traditional risk factors.”

The center will provide a thorough assessment of South Asians and make it available to both patients and their physicians, he said.

“And then beyond that, there’ll be a case manager—and this is very important because it happens to so many of us. We go to the doctor, the doctor says ‘Okay, you have to take off a few pounds, you know, improve the diet and exercise,’ so for maybe two or three weeks you do it and then you kinda slop off, you go back to business as usual,” he said.

“We feel very, very strongly that we need to help the individuals that come into the center to follow through. Somebody is going to follow up with you to encourage you and assist you in getting the advice you need—it could be nutrition counseling, it could be fitness counseling, it could be stress reduction. It could be physician referrals.”

Friedenberg said that if enough South Asians came to the center, this could lead to broader national interest. “In terms of research scholars and research studies to more fully understand what’s really driving this high rate of coronary artery disease in the South Asian community, we are hoping that our program will help to inspire or perhaps provoke medical leadership in the national level to take a closer look at this,” he added. Alles contributed the lead gift for the South Asian Health Center fundraising campaign in furtherance of the mission of her foundation, Stree: Global Investments in Women.

Stree's focus is to inspire and empower leadership among women living at risk, including in the field of health care, in the United States and internationally.

Alles, born to Sri Lankan parents, has a background in nursing and psychology. She is reported to have a small fortune in Silicon Valley through judicious investments in the 1990s boom.

She also had a very personal motivation: "All four of my grandparents and my father died of a heart attack before they turned 65 years old. El Camino Hospital is the first organization to take notice of this epidemic and it is taking the initiative to do something about it for the South Asian community. This is an extremely important project and worthy of the attention of every South Asian family living in Silicon Valley."

Personal motivation also drives Nivisha Mehta, the center's interim executive director. "My dad had four angioplasties, my husband has high cholesterol, my aunt had a heart attack last year, my other uncle had a heart attack, so I'm very motivated to have a center like this in Silicon Valley to which people can come to because it is preventable, and I'm very excited to be on the project," she told **India-West**.

Initially, the South Asian Heart Center will provide cardiac screenings for the identified risk factors in addition to prevention education and referrals to wellness providers (e.g. yoga, fitness, meditation, diet, and exercise). The center's education program will also target the medical community with information about the need to adopt cardiac screening guidelines tailored to South Asians with the goal to have doctors prescribe, and insurers cover, routine tests of South Asian patients at a younger age for the specific predictors of heart disease among this population.

Friedenberg said the center would be launched soon. "We hope to launch the center in the next couple of months," he said. "We've put together a five-year budget, it's approximately five million dollars in five years."

The center is seeking volunteers and prospective donors. Interested readers can reach the center's interim executive director, Nivisha Mehta, by phone at (408) 323-9275 or e-mail at nivisha@sbcglobal.net