

Part 2

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Part 2 ★



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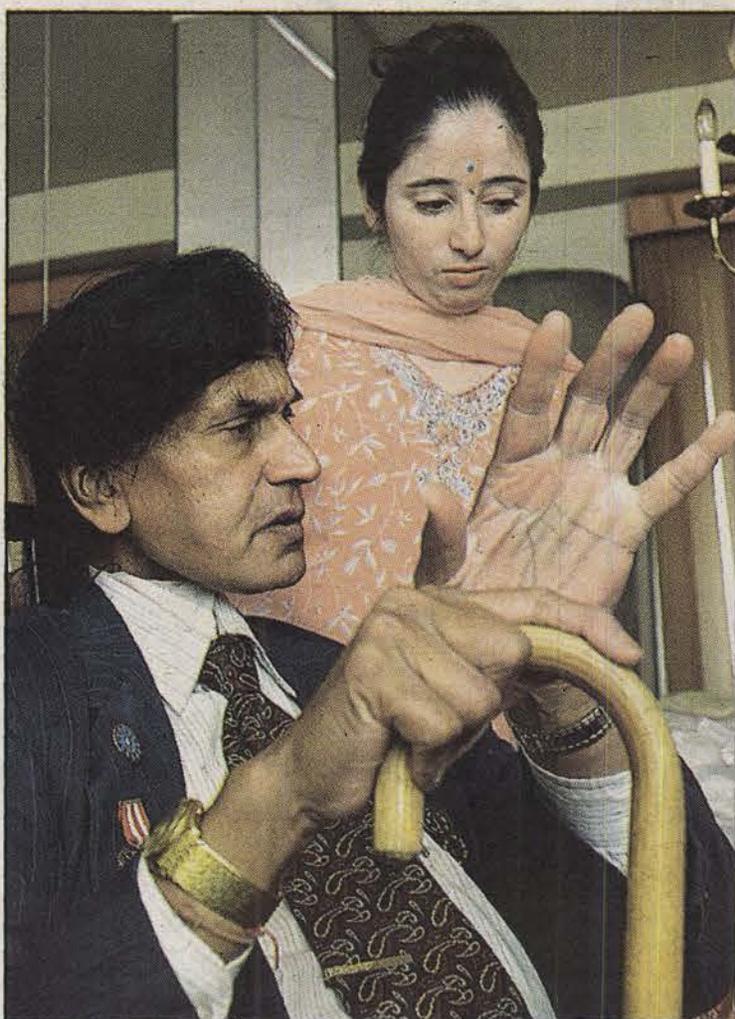
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Fastest Scalpel in the East

Doctor's free surgeries give poor children in India new faces and new futures

By Bill Jensen



Newsday Photo / Michael E. Ach

HIS RIGHT SIDE was paralyzed after a car he was driving flipped six times on an Alaska road in 1978. He learned to operate with his left hand while getting around in a wheelchair. When his right hand started to regain feeling, he was diagnosed with cancer of the larynx. It took him five years to learn how to talk again, which would take him to right around the time he had his first major heart attack. Six years later, he had a second massive heart attack.

You could make a solid case that Sharadkumar Dicksheet was unjustly passed over when they were handing out all the four-leaf clovers and rabbits' feet. But you don't need luck when you've got mettle — and the fastest scalpel in the East.

For the past 32 years, Dicksheet, 71, has organized The India Project-Plastic Surgery Camp, a roving clinic performing free plastic surgery on children with facial deformities throughout India. One out of every 400 children in India is

Dr. Sharadkumar Dicksheet, 71, with his surgery nurse, Seema Wakadmane; he has overcome cancer, paralysis and heart attacks to help more than 54,000 children.

born with a cleft lip or palate. Not only does the genetic disfigurement cause emotional damage, it is also a major health concern. Children born with the malady often cannot breast feed; many others die from infections. Dicksheet has operated on 54,000 children since 1968, and is gearing up for more.

The incense accentuates the heat that has built up on the 17th floor of the Brooklyn apartment building Dicksheet calls home half the year. Black-suited and barefoot, the doctor slouches on a leather sectional couch in the center of a living room with haphazard piles of papers and boxes stacked halfway up the walls. His hands wrap around a wooden cane as he talks in a corrupted whisper. He looks the part of a doctor, not of the 21st century, but of another time — more medicine man than Marcus Welby. In two days, he will be back

See DOCTOR on B14

The Robot as Sorcerer's Apprentice

IT'S TIME FOR Science Lurches Forward, the column in which we look at what our top scientific brains have been thinking, and wonder if maybe they should be getting more sleep.

Our lead story, brought to our attention by alert journalist Claire Martin, is an exciting robot concept invented by Ian Kelly of the University of West England, which, as you might suspect, is a university situated in west England.

Kelly is trying to solve a major problem with today's robots, which is that they need human help to function. Eventually, they run out of power, and somebody must replace their batteries. We do not have truly independent robots, like the one played by Arnold Schwarzenegger in "The Terminator." If you tried to replace that robot's batteries, it would rip your head off. In fact, it would rip your head off anyway. That's how independent it is.

To produce a robot of that caliber, we need a scientific breakthrough. That's where Kelly comes in. He has built a robot that, when perfected, will power itself by — we are not making this up — catching slugs, and using them as fuel. Kelly calls his invention "SlugBot." Of course, this basic concept is not new. The French have been converting snails into energy for centuries. But the French are, for the most part, human, whereas SlugBot is a purely mechanical device.

It looks kind of like a power mower with a long robot arm; you can see it on Dr. Kelly's Web site, www.ias.uwe.ac.uk/

goto.html?slugbot. When SlugBot detects a slug, the arm swoops down, snorks it up and drops it into a drawer; when the drawer is full, SlugBot screams and passes out.

No, sorry, that's what *we* would do, if our drawers were full of slugs. ("Drawers Full of Slugs" would be a good name for a rock band.) What SlugBot will do, once it is fully operational, is convert the slugs into electrical power via some chemical process that we frankly are not scientific enough to understand. Apparently, slugs

contain electricity, which comes as a shock (Har!) to those of us who thought they were basically little bags of slime that have figured out how to crawl.

Anyway, Kelly's goal is for SlugBot to be able — without any human assistance — to catch slugs, turn them into energy, then use this energy to proceed with its mission, which is, well, catching more slugs. If that sounds pointless to you, ask yourself this question: In what significant way is SlugBot's lifestyle different from yours? But here's the exciting



Dave Barry

thing: If the SlugBot concept works, maybe it could be adapted in ways that would truly benefit humanity. One obvious application, which I'm sure has already occurred to you, is: automatic movie usher.

Picture the scene: You're in the theater, watching a movie, really enjoying the experience, except for the fact that your feet are bonded to the floor by the most powerful adhesive on earth, Raisinet goo.

Suddenly, two rows behind you, a cell

phone rings, and some moron starts yacking. You think the night is ruined. But wait! You hear a whir, and a dark shape glides up the aisle. A second later, a robot arm snakes out and . . . SNORK, the cell phone is plucked from the moron's hand. There is applause from the movie patrons. It grows louder when the robot arm reaches out again and . . . SNORK, the moron is plucked from his seat.

Because, hey, UsherBot has to eat. Our next item in Science Lurches Forward comes from an Aug. 11 Science News article sent in by alert reader John Dodds. It states that frog scientists at UCLA are studying — and we are still not making this up — "the brilliant-thighed dart-poison frog." We assume, based on the news story, that this is the frog that provides the poison for poison-tipped darts, and that it has brilliant thighs, which would also be a good name for a rock band.

Anyway, these scientists wish to observe what happens when a male brilliant-thighed poison frog attacks another male. They tried playing a recording of a frog call, but this did not cause real frogs to attack. So they built — you guessed it — a robot frog, which sits on a fake log with a speaker in it. The scientists report that real frogs attack the robot, apparently fooled by its having a realistic-looking inflatable throat sac, made from a condom.

So there you have it: At long last, scientists have found a way, using condoms, to make poison frogs angry. I know I speak for all humanity when I say to the scientific community, by way of sincere gratitude: Please stop. ■

Dave Barry's column appears Mondays in Part 2.

Plastic Surgeon Works for Free

DOCTOR from B2

in India, performing his usual 50 to 60 surgeries crammed into a 12-hour day.

"I'm still able to work good with my hands," says Dicksheet, working through a smile. "I still have good eyes and a good brain. The other option was to stay in a nursing home and wait for death. Death will come when it comes; why should I wait for it?"

Having grown up in a lower-middle-class household in India, Dicksheet saw firsthand how facial deformities could destroy the emotional and physical well-being of children around him. After coming to America in 1958 for a surgical residency, he wanted to return to India to start a practice. "My friends said I was crazy to go back," Dicksheet remembers. So he started a private practice in New York, which he would tend to half the year. The other half would be in the service of the poor back home.

His camp travels to 30 locations in India, stopping for three or four days at well-staffed and well-supplied hospitals rented at each site. Families walk for miles to give their children hope for a better life.

To the swells of ever-present classical music, Dicksheet's breakneck pace begins at 6 a.m. He fixes a cleft lip in 22 minutes flat, claps his hands ("because I can't shout that I'm ready for the next one"), and the nurse will bring in a boy with squint eye, which he will fix in four minutes, followed by a girl with a facial scar, which he will remove in 10 minutes. Younger plastic surgeons from America have been working beside him for the past 10 years. They can usually complete 10 cases a day. Dicksheet hits that mark before lunch.

His work is particularly important for females, whose economic well-being in India is most often linked to marriage. "For girls, that can make a whole difference in their life," says Dicksheet, who even does the occasional nose job when he has time. The surgeries would cost \$10,000 each, on average, if performed in New York.

Dicksheet, twice divorced, with three adult children, gave up his private practice after his second heart attack and is financing his trips with his dwindling life savings (his time in New York is spent coordinating the camps and fund-raising). This month he was presented with the 2001 Kellogg's Hannah Neil World of Children Award, honoring those who dedicate their lives to helping children around the globe. The award came with a \$100,000 prize. Dicksheet will splurge on more sutures and anesthesia.

"See this suit," he says, tugging on his lapel. "I've been wearing it since 1994. One suit, one shirt, one pair of shoes. That's all I need." If he has one vice, it's collecting videos and DVDs, mostly Indian cinema, although he also loves American classics. His tiny slivers of downtime also include listening to music and reciting passages from the Bhagavad Gita, a Hindu devotional work. But surgery is his hobby, fulfilling a dual role in his life. "Surgery is fun for me," he says. "If you want to serve the Lord, serve the human beings."

Behind the living room wall, Dicksheet's head nurse of two years is preparing food in his small kitchen. Seema Wakadmane, 27, accompanied Dicksheet for the first time to the United States to receive the Neil award, which was presented at a ceremony in Columbus, Ohio. With an ICU background, Wakadmane is one of the few nurses who can keep up with his frenetic pace. Lately, she's also had to serve up oxygen hits to Dicksheet as he operates.

"I fell down in the bathroom on Nov. 10, broke four ribs," the doctor says with a painful smile. "But, the world must go on." ■

Bill Jensen is a freelance writer.

Dr. Dicksheet won the 2001 Kellogg's Hannah Neil World of Children Award, which honors those who dedicate their lives to helping children around the world.