

Dr. Khami Chokani... The Journey Home

Most Fascinating People
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By Gail Jansen

It has been a long and laboured journey, both personally and professionally, that has brought Dr. Khami Chokani, Medical Health Officer for the Cypress Health Region, here to Swift Current.

Born of educated parents in the Republic of Malawi in southeastern Africa, Dr. Chokani's father was a Minister in the Malawi government. Political unrest and opposition to the country's then leader, President Kamuzu Banda, saw the family exiled from their homeland to Zambia in what would become the first of a series of successive moves.

From Zambia the family moved to England, and from England to Botswana, where the young, not-yet-doctor Chokani attended high school with his two younger brothers. It was here where he first became intrigued with biology and medicine.

"What intrigues me is understanding what makes a person function and how all the systems work together," says Chokani.

"I have always believed that when a person is ill, it is not just caused by one thing, it is a number of things, and not only to do with that individual, but their loved ones as well. When you are dealing with an individual, you are not only dealing with them, you are also dealing with their entire family and their entire community as well."

Chokani had originally hoped to study medicine in India, at a university which echoed his own holistic view, but a policy which required foreign students to have the backing of their country of origin's government was something the young exile could not procure as a political refugee.

Leaving India after some pre-med studies, Chokani moved to Minnesota and St. John's University to finish his pre-med degree, where he was offered a scholarship to study for the medical degree for which he longed.

Still his heart was set on studying in India, because of what he felt they could teach him.

Relaxed foreign student policies finally gave him that chance and he soon earned his medical degree from the University of Rajasthan. There he was taught the most important tool a doctor has at his disposal is the area that exists between his stethoscope's two ear pieces — his brain.

"A doctor needs to fully assess his patient," says Chokani

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— Annie Narine, General Manager
Swift Current Mall



of the teachings he received. "The way they look, the way they walk, the way they talk, all those kinds of things will help lead you to a diagnosis."

But the biggest thing Chokani gained while studying in India was the realization all people are meant to be healthy.

"There are a lot of things that we can do to prevent us from becoming ill and being a burden on society and these are things that we need to do. These are known as primary prevention, and can include the types of meals we eat (and) the amount of activity we have. All those types of things. It also includes the type of interactions an individual has with his community."

With a growing interest in public and community health there was still more travel in the cards for the young doctor, who left India yet again, first to work for the Government of Zambia, followed by a post-graduate diploma in England in tropical medicine and hygiene.

A return to Zambia to work for the Zambia Copper Consolidated Mines and his own private practice, rounded out his early career, before a momentous political event allowed him to return to his homeland for the first time in nearly 30 years.

In the summer of 1993, a referendum was held that ended the 30-year stranglehold President Banda had held on the government and for the first time since his exile, Chokani returned to Malawi to serve as Medical Superintendent for the Ministry of Health and Population. His focus there was to work to increase his skills in health planning and policy to help to develop the Malawi health-care system which had

been thrust into near non-existence by the country's extreme poverty.

It was a position which required him to again head back to school to study at the Rollins School of Public Health in Atlanta — an area of study that would eventually lead him first to Nashville, where he went with his new Zambian wife and child, and then to some of the most dangerous places on the planet.

Working in the field of Health Management Systems, Chokani was enlisted as a sort of "health mercenary" to establish new health-care regimes.

"My specialization in health management put me directly into war-torn areas. There, I was to determine the status of the health-care system and to try to put in processes to help it get it back on its feet, and in doing so, make it as dynamic as possible to respond to very rapidly-changing situations."

As would be expected, the stresses of such a job were immense, and Chokani's desire for more stability in his life, and to rid himself of the necessity of falling asleep each night with his passport strapped to his chest, led him to eventually being offered a position in Swift Current in 2001.

Before he and his family could begin their new lives here, a tragedy occurred whereby his wife passed away the night before their move.

Today, nearly seven years into his position as Chief Medical Officer — the longest Chokani has ever stayed in one place — he still manages to move around, but this time as a commuter.

Spending weekdays in Swift Current, Chokani commutes each weekend to Moose Jaw where his daughter Ina and his new wife Ann-Marie, whom he married in August of 2006, and who is also a doctor, await his arrival each week.

Chokani still believes in the teachings of his university in India, and applies those principles and the lessons he has learned throughout his life and the places he has lived, to building the Cypress Health Region into one of the strongest in Saskatchewan.

"Here in Swift Current, we are no longer an island," says Chokani. "We have a lot of outside influences, both good and bad, that creates our community, and when we create a health-care system to meet the needs of our rural community, we cannot take a cookie-cutter approach to it. Each piece of the system is part of a larger jigsaw puzzle, and we need to constantly be putting more pieces into place to make it workable."



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