Doc saves mentally ill wanderers from the streets of India

By Matthew Reyes-Cruz
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Bharat Batwani and his wife, both psychiatrists, set up in 1988 a foundation that nurses the mentally ill found wandering in the streets of India and reunites them with their families.

There was a new day for Batwani's Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation, which he founded in 1988, when he and his wife, both psychiatrists, set up in 1988 a foundation that nurses the mentally ill found wandering in the streets of India and reunites them with their families. Batwani's Shradha Rehabilitation Foundation, which he founded in 1988, has been able to reunite many families with their mentally ill loved ones.

Over three decades, more than 2,000 patients have been treated at the foundation's rehabilitation center in Mumbai.

Shradha, the Sanskrit word for "faith," is a place where patients can find solace and hope. It has wide open spaces where patients can grow vegetables.

For his work, Batwani has received the Ramon Magsaysay Award, Asia's highest honor, for "embracing India's mentally afflicted destitute" and "affirming the human dignity of even the most ostracized." —STORY BY MATTHEW REYES-CRUZ

Reuniting with families

The role of reuniting patients with their families often falls on the shoulders of Shradha's social workers, who are so thorough that they could put private investigators to shame.

Patients are paired with social workers who speak the same dialect. Like detectives, the social workers, who take the time to get to know Batwani's patients, are able to help them reunite with their families.

In trying to change the status of mental health care in India, Batwani battled not just widespread stigma against the mentally ill but also the pervasive centuries-old tradition of supernatural healing and "black magic." This is why returning patients to their loved ones is more than just orchestrating grand family reunions, he said. The patients became ambassadors for mental health care in their villages, many in remote rural areas, simply by showing that medication, not voodoo, works.

"It creates a ruffer in the entire village," Batwani said. "Not only has the patient come back, but he's come back in a much better shape, so that means there is treatment somewhere."

Reunited patients have come back to their families and have helped improve the mental health care in their villages.

Despite his achievements and multiple awards, Batwani feels he needs to do more. He belongs to a rare breed of Indian doctors who have chosen to continue their practice at home.

He notes that there are more Indian psychiatrists in the United Kingdom than in India.

"I think we have been lucky in the sense that the job satisfaction, the emotional feeling of joy, has been terrific from day one, and that has sustained us over the years," he said. INQ