The psychiatrist helping mentally ill people left to wander India’s streets

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Dr Vatwani has spent three decades reuniting patients with mental health problems with their families

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“85% of the people we pick up from the streets suffer from schizophrenia. I shudder to think of what they must have endured out there, especially the women. They are wandering in all kinds of severe weather—sick, hungry and invisible to the world,” Vatwani says.

After the Shradhda team has picked up a mentally disturbed person, she or he is taken to the residential treatment centre in Karjat, on the outskirts of Mumbai. Vatwani says: “Our medical treatment is coupled with kindness and empathy, which the patient rarely experienced on the streets. Depending on the severity of the illness, the person will spend anywhere between two to three months at the centre.”

Once Vatwani has certified a patient as ready to go home, a social worker who speaks the same language (or a close dialect) as the patient accompanies them home. Recognising the Herculean efforts of Shradhda’s committed team of social workers, Vatwani says: “Sometimes, patients’ families live in the most remote corners of the country and finding them requires some serious deductive work by the team. Often, we have to get the local police involved to locate the relatives.” Even after the reunion, the patient’s treatment continues as the foundation regularly sends medication to their home.

Shradhda’s rate of reuniting patients with their relatives is a staggering 95%, with more than 8,000 reunions to date, Vatwani says. Some patients have been separated from their families for years, even for decades. Inderjeet Ghai, a 70-year-old from the northern state of Punjab, was reunited with his kin, nearly 54 years after he had gone missing.

Many of the recovered patients have successfully reintegrated into society, with several going on to have jobs and careers. Gangadhar Vinode, 47, who was brought together with his relatives in 1991, after a three-month stay at Shradhda, is today a successful real estate developer in the neighbouring city of Pune.

“In seven out of 10 [reunions], the relatives are overjoyed at having their missing family member back. Occasionally, in the case of female patients, relatives are hesitant to accept them as they are concerned about what people around them will say. In such situations, the accompanying social worker will explain the importance of having the family’s support and involvement, for the patient’s recovery. We’ve mostly had successful [reunions],” says Vatwani.

For his decades of service to this vulnerable section of society, in 2018 Vatwani received the Magaysay award, widely recognised as Asia’s equivalent of the Nobel prize. “Given the scale of the mental health problem in the country, my contribution is insignificant,” says Vatwani. Despite his humility, however, the award has brought much needed global attention to the cause of wandering mentally ill people, and mental health in general.

“All anyone can be afflicted by a mental illness and end up wandering the streets,” Vatwani says. “Depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, addiction and other neuroses are so common nowadays. People suffering from these problems need as much love and support as those suffering from a physical illness.”