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front pages

Edited by Thomas K. Arnold

SAVING FACE

DR. MUNISH K. BATRA runs a lucrative, highly regarded cosmetic surgery practice in Carmel Valley. He sees and treats a parade of well-heeled clients who aren't happy with the physical-appearance cards nature — or time — has dealt them. Facelifts average \$15,000 a pop; breast lifts and augmentations range from \$7,000 to \$8,000; tummy tucks and liposuction start around \$5,000.

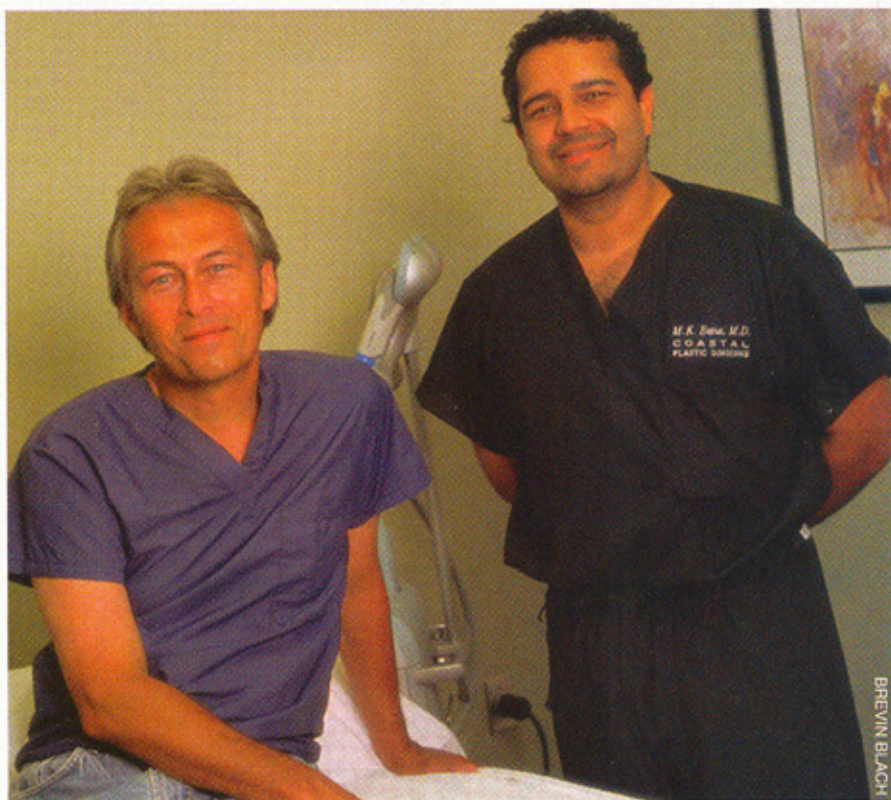
Batra, 37, remembers his predoctoral life, starting in a poor section of India, sharing cramped quarters with seven siblings. Life is treating Batra just fine now — so he gives back.

In March 2002, Batra and Dr. Michael Halls, a top-flight microsurgeon from East County, founded a nonprofit organization to perform craniofacial and other reconstructive surgery on San Diegans who otherwise can't afford it. Since then, Doctors Offering Charitable Services (DOCS) has grown to include more than a dozen physicians and volunteers. They've treated upwards of 30 patients, including a single mom, suffering from a rare disease, whose face and skull were covered with bony tumors; a 27-year-old Mexican woman whose boyfriend had shot her in the face; and a Marine whose face had been demolished in a car accident.

"The idea came to me from something my father had wanted me to do," says Batra, who lives in Encinitas. "He always felt we were very thankful to be here in the United States and should be giving something back to the community."

Vicki Wiesen, 41, the woman with the tumors, says she owes Batra a tremendous debt of gratitude. "This has been a really big thing in my life," she says. "I had two previous surgeries, but my bone kept growing back really irregularly, and I'd been living life where I didn't want to go out because my forehead was deformed."

For several years before forming DOCS, Batra and Hall had been performing pro bono surgeries in countries like Thailand, India and Mexico. Batra, whose subspecialty is cranio-



Drs. Michael Halls (left) and Munish K. Batra, founders of DOCS, a nonprofit outfit that provides free reconstructive surgery to deserving San Diegans.

facial surgery, spent much of his time treating cleft palates and abnormally shaped heads.

"But there's a real need here in San Diego as well," Batra says. "Between 12 percent and 15 percent of the people here don't have health insurance, and one out of every three children lives in poverty. Many of these people are migrant workers, Native Americans and other minorities. And then there are victims of domestic violence and the homeless, including children, who do not have ready access to medical care."

Batra and Hall are also involved with Monarch School, a year-round academy for homeless and other at-risk teens. "Some of these

kids have self-esteem issues — there are males with breast tissue who are embarrassed to take off their shirts, and girls with nose and other facial deformities," Batra says. "And these are all people right here in San Diego we can treat without having to go overseas."

Batra and his fellow DOCS find these patients chiefly through referrals, often from trauma centers, and are always on the lookout for worthy cases. They can be reached at 858-847-0800.

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