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Experts Say Assisted Living Stigma Needs to be Overcome

By KETAKI GOKHALE
India-West Staff Reporter

Mona Lalchandani's sister-in-law came to her last year with a dilemma that has become increasingly common in the South Asian American community: How are she and her siblings, all based in the U.S., going to take care of their 80-year-old mother who lives in India? "She was used to living independently," Lalchandani told India-West, "but as the years went on, it was becoming more and more important to her kids that she move to the U.S."

Eventually, Lalchandani came up with an arrangement that suited the whole family - the woman, a U.S. permanent resident, would spend half the year in India, and the other half at a Fremont, Calif.-based assisted living facility called Carlton Plaza. The managers of the center said they could arrange vegetarian meals for her, and would shuttle her to and from the local Hindu temple.

"Among Indians, there's this stigma against placing your parents in assisted living," Lalchandani said. "There's this idea that you're 'putting them away,' and, maybe because we believe in a karmic cycle, we believe that if we don't take care of our parents, the same thing will happen to us."

Indian seniors, too, are wary of assisted living facilities, Lalchandani said. "As we get on in age, we want to be around our own people, eat our own food, and of course, there is fear - it's got to be scary."

Even Indian American seniors, many of whom have spent decades in the U.S., are not eager to join assisted living facilities, she said. And their children, who have grown up in the U.S., have internalized the cultural stigma against using such facilities.

"Most people will try to keep their parents at home, and it can get very stressful because there's a lot of Alzheimer's and dementia in our community," Lalchandani told India-West.

At an ethnic media round table recently held at the American Association of Retired People's first national diversity conference, Sarwat Husain, the Pakistani American publisher of a Muslim publication called Al-Ittihaad Unity Monthly, noted that many South Asian American elders are unaware of the social and health services that are available to them, which compounds their vulnerability.

Indian American seniors who are U.S. citizens or green card holders are often surprised to learn that, through Medi-Cal, they can have a professional caregiver come to their home to cook and clean during the day at no cost, and they can use a free paratransit service, Lalchandani said.

Also available through Medi-Cal is what is known as "social day-care" for seniors. The service includes daytime activities, lunch, and bus rides to and from home.

Most South Asian Americans in geriatric care agree, however, that the right solution for the community's elders is yet to be found. "There's a cultural barrier that prevents them from seeking care," Lalchandani told India-West. "We have this idea that you take care of your own, and that barrier has not been overcome yet."

Many of California's immigrant communities have taken significant steps to provide culturally specific care for their elders. Aegis Gardens, for example, a Fremont, Calif. assisted living center, caters to elderly Chinese Americans, offering Chinese food, design and gardens, and a Chinese-speaking staff. The On Lok Senior Health Center in Oakland, Calif., a nonprofit agency run by the county, provides social day-care services for Filipino Americans.

Lalchandani said it's only a matter of time before assisted living centers catering specifically to Indian Americans crop up in the San Francisco Bay Area. In the meantime, she and her husband have bought long-term insurance. Elder care can get expensive, ranging from \$2,000 a month for basic "board and care" facilities, to \$6,000 for an upscale assisted living facility, and Lalchandani doesn't want "that kind of pressure on [her] kids," she told India-West.

The AristaCare Health Services, a private group of skilled nursing homes based in Perth Amboy, N.J., is taking the first steps towards providing culturally specific care for the nation's estimated 78,000-plus Indian American seniors. The center's "AristaCare Indian Program" is operated out of two floors in two local facilities, and serves 94 disabled Indian American seniors.

"They are a mixture of people - some are parents of people who've been in the U.S. a long time," program director Mukund Thakar told India-West. "Those people can't speak English, their children work all day, and they have no choice but to place them in our center. Others are people who've lived in the U.S. a long time, and they've come to us because they need help."

The center provides Indian American residents with Indian food and television channels. Residents can participate in Hindu festival programs and be treated by Indian doctors and nurses. The program, Thakar said, has been an astonishing success. He will bring the Indian program to the center's Houston, Tex. facility next month, and a third New Jersey program unit will be launched in August. Plans for a California Indian American nursing center are in the works, he added.

"Before, people wanted to keep their parents at home, but that's changing since I started my nursing home," Thakar told India-West. "The seniors are happy, and their families are happy, too. The whole concept has changed."

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