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South Asian heart center is the first in the world

By Sarmishta Ramesh

People of South Asian origin, which includes those from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar [Burma], have the highest risk of coronary artery disease in the world.

The Bay Area may be the best place for this group to be living.

Malini Alles, a Silicon Valley-based entrepreneur and philanthropist, held a fundraiser in her Los Altos home on Sept. 24 to rally the Indian community's support for the world's first heart center that will focus on South Asians.

The South Asian Heart Center that is expected to open at El Camino Hospital this fall, will develop unique assessment models for this ethnic group. The center will work with physicians and patients in the United States and internationally, providing education and awareness about this group's high risk of coronary artery disease.

It is estimated that about 1.6 million South Asians live in the United States today, and more than 250,000 live in the Bay Area. Studies conducted by El Camino Hospital between 2002 and 2004 show that 5.6 percent of the patients admitted to the hospital with acute myocardial infarctions (heart attacks) during this period were South Asians.

Among this group, the numbers are more troubling for those of Indian origin. Coronary disease rates among Indians worldwide are 50 to 400 percent higher than people of other ethnic origins. Compared to other Asian groups, hospitalization due to heart ailment is also higher among Indians. According to El Camino Hospital, studies show that India is now "in the middle of a coronary artery disease epidemic."

Talking to the gathering of some 50 influential Indian Americans who attended the fundraiser, Dr. Cesar Molina, a leading cardiologist at El Camino Hospital, said, "We see young engineers who are 43 or 44 years old coming in with heart attacks. This is unheard of in other ethnic groups."

Molina also said that, according to hospital records, the youngest Indian to suffer a heart attack was 24 years old. "We need to look at the South Asian Heart Center as an investment on life," he said.

The center's vision is to dramatically improve the physical and mental health of South Asians around the world. They hope to do this through a culturally appropriate prevention program that incorporates education, advanced screening, lifestyle changes and case management.

Molina said the center will recommend to physicians everywhere that they treat patients of South Asian origin differently.

"The threshold of intervention and goals of treatment should be lower in South Asians than in whites by 10 to 20 percent," he said.

In June, the South Asian Heart Center received a major transfusion when Alles donated \$1 million towards the program. "I have a personal reason to invest in this. Everyone in my family died by the time they were 63 because of some kind of heart ailment. We need this kind of center, and God willing, I hope to make it past that age," added the 36-year-old entrepreneur.

"India is a booming economy today. The changes in lifestyle and culture there are a reflection of what is happening here. Since Silicon Valley is the place where everything starts, let's get this program up and running so it will benefit Indians not just in the U.S., but those in India and worldwide," she said.

Nivisha Mehta, interim executive director of the center, said the response from the people who attended the fundraiser was both "positive and encouraging" and added that the hospital hopes to open the center within two months.