

INSIDE TECHNOLOGY

Web, digital camera ease job of providing surgery in Nepal

JON VAN

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For most of us who exchange e-mails, check the weather or make purchases through the Internet, the Web's worldwide aspect may not have much significance.

But for Dr. Shankar Man Rai, a surgeon who practices in Katmandu, Nepal, it is a lifeline. Rai is in Chicago this week to pick up a prestigious humanitarian award at the American Medical Association's annual meeting.

He is director of a surgical outreach center in Katmandu where he provides free surgeries for impoverished children with birth defects and disabling afflictions such as cleft lips and burns.

Each week Rai spends six to eight hours on the Web exchanging e-mails with colleagues from around the world providing and receiving advice about difficult cases.

Interplast, a humanitarian organization based in Mountain View, Calif., provided Rai with a computer and digital camera, as it has for other surgeons in developing countries.

The physicians make images of their patients which they post on the Web along with a clinical history, diagnosis and proposed course of treatment.

Physicians in the United States and other developed countries provide insight and advice, as do surgeons from developing countries. After treatment is provided, the surgeons describe what was done and the outcome.

"Different people have opinions based on their experience," said Rai. "We make our own decisions. If we encounter a difficulty in the surgery, we can post this on the Web so that others may learn from it. It's an educational experience for all of us."

As surgeons exchange ideas and opinions with one another they get a feeling for each other's experience, Rai said. "It gets easier to interact as people get to know each other. It's like a classroom or seminar."

Plastic surgery cases especially lend themselves to electronic consultation because of the visual nature of the afflictions, said Rai, who uses a dial-up connection to reach the Internet. Apart from being slow, it works pretty well, he said.

The Katmandu center and Rai have treated more than 3,000 patients in three years.

Rai, born in rural Nepal, worked his way through medical school and spent three years in the United States training in plastic surgery.

He will receive the AMA's Nathan R. Davis Award in international medicine and public health, which carries a \$20,000 grant and a Steuben sculpture.