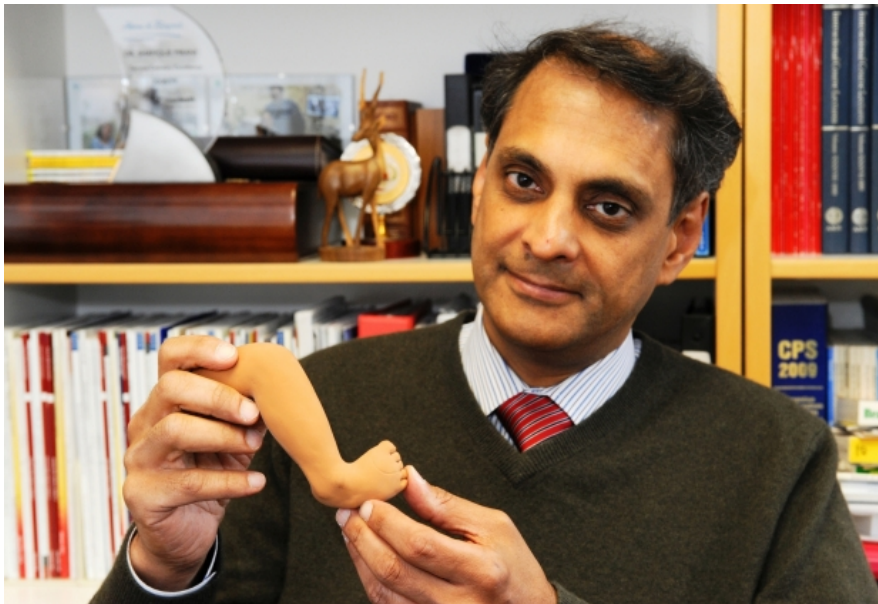


## Exiled from Uganda as teen, New Westminster doctor returns to help children

New Westminster physician is responsible for establishing a club foot treatment campaign in Africa that is spreading internationally

**BY: GERRY BELLETT, VANCOUVER SUN** MARCH 16, 2011



*Dr. Shafique Pirani, an orthopedic surgeon, is one of the speakers at a Simon Fraser University symposium, "Engaging Diaspora in Development," on Wednesday at the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, 530 West Hastings St., from 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. Photograph by: GLENN BAGLO, Vancouver Sun*

In 1972, dictator Idi Amin read a message in the heavens telling him to expel all Ugandans of Indian origin from their African home.

The resulting diaspora included 15-year-old Shafique Pirani, who along with his parents, grandparents and five siblings, packed his life in a suitcase and fled before Amin's 90-day deadline expired.

But it's a measure of the human capacity for forgiveness that when the teenager grew up to become an eminent surgeon, he would return to his birth land to help cure

Ugandan children of club foot deformity.

Dr. Shafique Pirani, an orthopedic surgeon, is one of the speakers at a Simon Fraser University symposium, "Engaging Diaspora in Development," on Wednesday at the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, 530 West Hastings St., from 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m.

The New Westminster physician is responsible for an international club foot treatment campaign that can be traced to a 1995 visit he and his parents made to Uganda, their first visit since the expulsion.

"It was only a five-day visit to see our home and the old school I went to, but the problem with club foot was apparent. By then I'd been practising several years and I had an interest in club foot because worldwide it affects one baby out of 150,000 born each year," he said.

At that time, club foot was treated surgically, which placed it beyond the means of children in a poor country like Uganda. However, in 1997 Pirani discovered that an American physician, Ignacio Ponseti, had developed a non-surgical method of treating club foot. The Ponseti Method had been developed 50 years ago, but failed to catch on.

"I started using his technique. In club foot deformity the foot's all there, it's just twisted out of shape and people end up standing on top of the foot with their toes curled back," he said.

Using the Ponseti Method "you push very gently and accurately on the foot to uncurl it and then put a cast on. You put another cast on five weeks later and make a slight incision in a tendon and after that the foot's corrected and looks like normal. To keep it from coming back you put a brace on at night," he said.

As the Ponseti Method doesn't involve surgery, Pirani believed it could be taught to paramedics in Uganda, so in 1998 he put together the Uganda Clubfoot Project.

Beginning in 1999, he would revisit Uganda and on subsequent visits for the next four years would train paramedics in the Ponseti Method using \$225,000 raised for the purpose by the Rotary Clubs of Burnaby and New Westminster.

In 2003, he evaluated the program and found the results had not been as successful as hoped.

"We found it hadn't worked in all cases. There had been problems with supplies, a child would come back for the second cast and there was no plaster available, or no brace, or after we'd trained a paramedic they'd return to their clinics and their supervisors wouldn't allow it," he said.

“So now we formed the Uganda Sustainable Clubfoot Project. When I first went there as an orthopedic surgeon I didn’t have the skills to provide sustainability but now I brought with me public health professionals and the Uganda ministry of health became involved,” he said.

In 2004, the Canadian International Development Agency put up \$1 million for a seven-year program to build capacity in the Ugandan health system so the procedure would be available at the country’s 38 clinics. It also trained medical and paramedical professionals and nurses to identify club foot in newborn babies. Last year, more than 700 children with club foot were treated.

“It costs about \$150 per treatment which if you divide it by a life expectancy of 50 years comes out to \$3 a year,” he said. “And when you realize that if you have such a condition in Uganda you can’t work, you won’t get married and the chances are you’ll live in poverty for the rest of your life. So it’s a bargain,” said Pirani who has visited Uganda 30 times in the last 10 years.

The program has been so successful that it has been expanded to Malawi, Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Bangladesh and has drawn interest from Brazil, Honduras, India and Nepal.

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### **The other speakers at today's Engaging Diaspora in Development are:**

- Mohammad Zaman, social safeguard/resettlement specialist and executive director of the Society for Bangladesh Climate Justice. The society is concerned about the effects of global warming and climate change on Bangladesh, which, it says, is at the epicentre of a gathering climate-change calamity as about 23 per cent of the country's area is vulnerable to a sea-level rise which could by 2030 see 30 million persons displaced.
- Marjorie Ratel, a Vancouver-based neuroscience nurse who founded Korle-Bu Neuroscience Foundation (KBNF) with a particular focus on Ghana and the West Africa region.
- Derek Agyapong-Poku, vice-president of KBNF, president of Excellence in Africa Neuroscience and Health, and the Canadian-Ghana liaison.
- Steven Pi, president of Hands Across the World, a non-profit organization that has mobilized the Chinese diaspora in Vancouver and other supporters to take on a number of projects in China.

- Lyren Chiu, founder and president of the Canadian Research Institute of Spirituality and Healing.

- Jerry Spiegel, a professor at the Liu Institute for Global Issues and the School of Population and Public Health at UBC. He is presently leading several ecosystem health projects in Cuba and Central Europe and is part of the team undertaking a study of the effects of globalization on the Canadian health care system for the Romanow Commission.

- Ashok Mathur is the director of the Centre for Innovation in Culture and the Arts in Canada at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops.

- Dialogue co-moderator is Ajay Puri, coordinator of the Ethno-Cultural Research Network.