



A Dey in the Life

Dr. Samuel E. Dey Jr. is working to ensure that psychiatry won't be treated like an "ugly stepchild" by the medical community, employers and insurers.

BY LAUREL DiGANGI

AS A SMALL CHILD growing up in Guyana, Samuel E. Dey Jr., MD, was strongly influenced by his maternal grandparents, the patriarch and matriarch of his large household.

"Papa" was both the family disciplinarian and a beloved father figure who regularly climbed the tall guava, coconut and mango trees that grew on his property and picked fresh fruit for his family. "Granny" kept busy with child care, household tasks and creating culinary delights: fresh wheat bread on Friday nights and the occasional treat of homemade cassava bread.

It was Papa, Granny and his deeply religious paternal grandmother ("Mama") who inspired Dr. Dey to choose a subspecialty in geriatric psychiatry.

"I've always found myself drawn to those aspects of medicine that deal more with older people," he says, "and I've always felt that it was due to the special relationship I had with my grandparents."

Today, Dr. Dey treats "more geriatric patients than the average psychiatrist" as part of Dogon Psychiatric Medical Group, a multidisciplinary mental-health treatment group formed in Riverside in 1998. His wife, Andrea, serves as his office manager.

"In the beginning, it wasn't always easy to work together, but over time we've developed an understanding of how our office should work—and I think we make a very good team," he says.

Dr. Dey is also affiliated with Parkview Hospital in Riverside and is medical director of geriatric psychiatric services at the Community Hospital of San Bernardino.

An Early Impression

Dr. Dey's childhood served as a catalyst for his career choice. His father was a career civil servant for the Guyanese govern-



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ment, his mother a teacher. One day in the early 1960s, Dr. Dey's mother took him home from school, and they exited the bus at an unfamiliar stop.

"There was a house with a long line of people waiting out the door," he says.

After waiting in line for what seemed like forever, "a nurse dressed in white asked me to stick out my tongue."

He was surprised—and relieved—when she put a sweet-tasting substance on his tongue and told him he had just been given a polio vaccine. He had feared the injection as much as the prospect of contracting polio: A local villager afflicted with the disease had made the threat very real.

"I was so impressed by the experience that I wanted to be a doctor," Dr. Dey says.

Because his family was Seventh-Day Adventist (he sheepishly admits he's become a "backslider"), he chose Loma Linda University, an SDA institution, for his undergraduate studies. He went on to study medicine at Loma Linda University School of Medicine and completed his residency at the medical center.

During his psychiatry rotation at Riverside General Hospital with Don Fisher, MD, he found his specialty. He had always been interested in mental health and was fascinated by the way Dr. Fisher could communicate with, diagnose and ultimately help deeply disturbed patients by talking to them and prescribing medication.

Today, Dr. Dey enjoys the opportunities psychiatry presents to spend more time talking to patients than he might have if he'd opted for another specialty. The quality of the doctor-patient relationship during the course of treatment is extremely important to him.

"Psychiatry is the one specialty that touches on every other specialty in medicine," he says. "If you want to have a rewarding, fulfilling experience in medicine, you can't go wrong in psychiatry."

The Isolated Elderly

In 1991, Dr. Dey became board certified in psychiatry. A year later, he was board certified in geriatric psychiatry, the subspecialty that harkens back to his

relationship with his grandparents.

In Guyana, elders play an integral role in raising children and supporting the family, and they typically live with their children and grandchildren. Dr. Dey believes the isolation elderly Americans experience in retirement communities, nursing homes and assisted-living facilities may reinforce their feelings of depression and abandonment.

"Even if the tendency toward depression is the same wherever you are, those circumstances may make depressive and other illnesses more likely to occur," he says.

An interest in the physiology of aging also drew Dr. Dey to this subspecialty.

"As you grow older, the mechanism by which you process medication changes," he says. "Your body becomes less efficient at processing meds; therefore, the effective dose decreases. A healthy adult male may need 20 mg Prozac, but when he gets to be 70 or 80, he may be able to get by with 5 or 10. As physicians, we sometimes get so busy that we may overlook the fact that older patients have special needs when prescribing meds."

Focusing on the Positive

One of Dr. Dey's missions is to help physicians manage their practices more effectively and profitably, especially in the era of managed care. He returned to school and earned a master's degree in business administration from the University of Redlands in 1998.

Despite his accomplishments, as an African-American male he is still the victim of occasional racism. Once, while pricing items at an office-supply store and "dressed down" in casual clothes, he was harassed by a police officer who suspected him of shoplifting. Another time, he and three other African-American friends were speeding down a freeway, racing against time to catch a plane at LAX. When the police pulled them over, their guns were drawn.

But Dr. Dey rarely gets too riled up by incidents like these anymore.

"Prejudice and racism will always be there in one form or another, so I try to focus my efforts on working with my kids," he says. And he uses these incidents to demonstrate an important point

to sons Sammy, 12, and Brandon, 10: "Just because there are people like this doesn't mean you won't be able to enjoy the opportunities that are available to those who are willing to work hard."

Serving the Underserved

Dr. Dey devotes time to providing care to underserved populations, including African-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, the developmentally disabled and the seriously mentally ill. These groups, he notes, access the mental-health system at a much lower rate, largely due to a lack of awareness and access to care.

He founded the Dogon Psychiatric Medical Group—a practice of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and marriage and family therapists—to help the underserved. In addition to treating well-insured clients, Dogon offers sliding-scale fees to clients who lack insurance coverage. The medical group also has a contract with a local Native American high school in Riverside, providing care in a holistic health program that helps Native American teenagers with substance abuse, behavioral issues and psychiatric illnesses. Dogon has partnered with the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino to establish a treatment center in Riverside to treat developmentally disabled clients.

Dogon is part of Dr. Dey's broader mission to improve the level of coverage offered to people with mental illness, thus providing better psychiatric care to all in need of treatment.

"Traditionally, psychiatry has been an 'ugly stepchild' from the standpoint of medicine itself, as well as employers and other people who determine medical coverage," he says, pointing to higher Medicare and insurance copays.

"People are afraid mental-health coverage will bankrupt the system. As a result, it's created a large public-health problem because there are many people who need mental-health treatment who can't get it simply because the coverage isn't there. One of my goals is to change that."

Dogon's Vision

Dr. Dey is frequently asked about the *continued on page 49*

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significance of the name “Dogon,” derived from an African tribe in Mali of the same name. The Dogon have amazed and confounded Western astronomers with their uncanny knowledge of the stars. Without technology or scientific method, they somehow had knowledge of Sirius’ companion star, Sirius B, which is invisible to the naked eye.

To Dr. Dey, the Dogon tribe represents vision and freedom, as the Dogon were the only African tribe never to be enslaved. Vision and freedom are the two qualities Dr. Dey wants to preserve within the psychiatric profession.

“We’ve been trying to anticipate what’s been happening in the field of mental health and try to use that anticipation to devise psychiatric and mental-health practices that allow us the freedom to pursue our own goals and ideas,” he says. ❖

Laurel DiGangi is a Burbank-based freelance writer. She is a regular contributor to Southern California Physician.