

HUMANITARIAN AWARD

Zaven S. Ayanian, MD, FACP

Class of 1959



The Upstate Medical Alumni Association honors Zaven S. Ayanian, MD '59, for his voluntarism and commitment to providing health care for the underserved in his community as a volunteer physician at the Parker Family Health Center.

A native Syracusan, Dr. Ayanian earned his undergraduate degree at Syracuse University. Upon graduation, he joined the U.S. Army, serving during the Korean conflict and achieving the rank of Captain. With help from the GI Bill, he attended Upstate Medical University. After an internship and residency training in internal medicine at Robert Packer Hospital/Guthrie Clinic in Pennsylvania, he joined a multi-specialty practice in Matawan, New Jersey, where he practiced for 35 years.

Early in his career, Ayanian became involved in the creation of a new acute care hospital needed in his community, and upon its opening, became the first medical staff president of the 225-bed Bayshore Community Hospital and chairman of its Department of Medicine. He was later elected to the hospital's board of

trustees, serving until 2010, when the hospital merged with the Meridian Health System.

In 1995, Ayanian was selected by the medical staff of Bayshore Community Hospital as Physician of the Year. The selection committee described their honoree as the "quintessential doctor to people in the community . . . Besides practicing excellent medicine, his love and devotion to his patients has endeared him to them."

While Ayanian retired from private practice in 1999, he didn't give up medicine. For the last 15 years, he has cared for low-income, uninsured patients at the Parker Family Health Center, an organization he has helped grow from a walk-in clinic operating out of a modified trailer two nights a week into a comprehensive healthcare facility open six days a week, providing 10,000 patient visits annually.

The Parker Family Health Center serves the working poor—those without health insurance or the resources to pay for medical treatment—in Monmouth County, New Jersey. The Parker Center differs from many "free clinics" in that it does not seek reimbursement from Medicare or Medicaid or other payers, but operates solely off the basis of charitable contributions and fundraising, providing care at no cost to patients, in some cases even paying for medications when the situation calls for additional assistance.

Ayanian was the second physician-volunteer recruited for the clinic. He has been volunteering every other Wednesday during the evening clinic hours from 2-7 p.m. for the past 15 years, seeing more than 3,000 patients during that time, as well as providing support and advice to staff and volunteer colleagues. He has also been an active participant in the clinic's program for third-year medical students from UMDNJ, the state's university of health sciences. In addition, he is an excellent example and role model for community service, helping the clinic recruit new physician-volunteers to join him in treating community members who otherwise would have little or no health care access.

Ayanian's focus at the clinic has been on patients with chronic disease, primarily heart disease, hypertension and diabetes, which are present in the patient population at very high rates, but also patients who are triaged when they present with acute problems, thus preventing emergency room visits and hospitalizations. His approach to chronic disease care is comprehensive. He works closely with the clinic's dietician, social worker and diabetes educator, seeking to educate patients about their condition and—in his words—facilitate their self-care. Many patients have complex conditions and significant co-morbidities and Ayanian is committed both to improving patients' health as well as reducing strains on the healthcare system by preventing hospitalizations that would be inevitable without proper care.

Uninsured patients come to the Parker Center from some 40 county towns. Many immigrant groups, including members of a Brazilian community in nearby Long Branch, are represented within the patient population, which is approximately 47 percent Latino. Many of the patients work in service jobs or for small businesses that cannot afford to offer health benefits and report very restricted family incomes—with almost all in the lowest category of \$25,500 or less for a family of four.

These are people Ayanian can relate to from experience. The son of Armenian parents who escaped the Ottoman Turkish genocide, Ayanian grew up understanding that he had to work hard for what he wanted in life. Armenian was his first language; he learned English when his older brother started kindergarten and came home speaking it. Although he successfully worked his way through college and medical school, he never forgot his roots.

His heritage has made him an especially valuable and sensitive clinician in a clinic that serves a large percentage of recent immigrants. It also inspired his sponsorship of several young victims of the 1989 Armenian earthquake, whom he brought to New Jersey for treatment,

which included multiple surgeries, amputations, and rehabilitation over a four-month period.

According to clinic director and coordinator Mary J. Nicosia, RN, APN-C, Ayanian stands out among a highly skilled body of volunteers for both his commitment to serving patients and by his engagement as care provider, teacher, and a professional colleague.

In 2010, the Parker Center nominated Ayanian for the American Medical Association's Jack B. McConnell, MD Award for Excellence in Volunteerism, an honor he received. In

announcing the award, AMA Foundation president Richard Hovland praised Ayanian's enduring presence with the Parker Family Health Center and his commitment to serving the working poor. "Dr. Ayanian is not only a compassionate physician," said Hovland, "he is also a teacher, mentor and leader."

While an Upstate Medical student, Ayanian met his wife, Lorraine Chesna, a nursing student at Syracuse University. The couple was married for 54 years before she passed away last November. They raised three children, each of whom pursued medical careers. The couple also established scholarship funds to help others enter medical fields—a scholarship supporting graduate nursing students at Syracuse University and another supporting medical students at Upstate Medical University.

"I've always enjoyed giving back in any way possible," says Ayanian. "I seem to have an inborn desire to help anyone who is attempting to improve his or her lot in life."

**BIO SUBMITTED BY DR. AYANIAN*



Dr. Ayanian with his late wife, Lori, and their three children.