

# HIGH- FLYING HOUSE CALLS

One cardiologist has single-handedly changed health care in northeastern Arizona.



CARDIOLOGIST STEVEN S. MEHTA HAS HIS HEAD IN THE CLOUDS 125 HOURS OUT of the year, but he's still one of the most down-to-Earth physicians you'll ever meet.

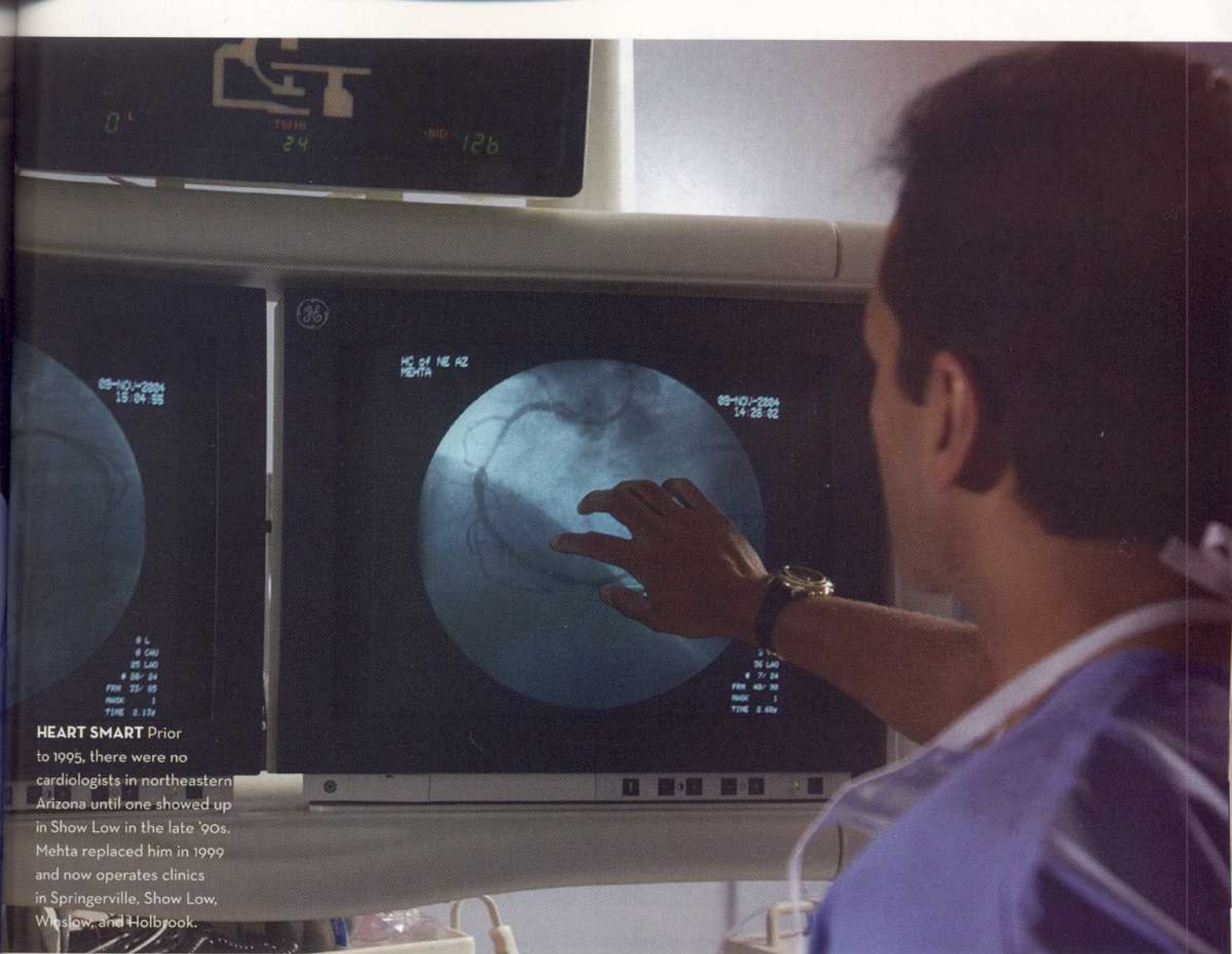
For the past seven years, Mehta has skipped around northeastern Arizona in his twin-engine AeroStar plane treating patients in underserved communities, merging a love of flying with a career as a nationally recognized cardiologist. In the process, he's also reinvented the way health care is delivered in some of the state's most isolated, rural areas and helped thousands of people live better, healthier lives.

"It's always been my dream to do something bigger, something that's going to affect hundreds of thousands of patients even after I'm gone," explains the Canton, Ohio-bred Mehta.

The idea for his unusual practice took flight in 1993, when Mehta's friend rolled his truck in a remote patch of northeastern Arizona and his passenger required specialized care not available in the small towns nearby.

Mehta, who flew up to get them and transported them back to Phoenix, recalls, "While I was waiting on them, I got to talking to the doctor working the ER. He mentioned what a great thing it was that I could fly up there, and would I consider coming up to see patients on a regular basis?"

A few months later, the flying physician scheduled his first patient visit among the Ponderosa pines of Springerville and discovered a need for cardiology services that was so great in the small mountain towns in the area—which have a combined population of more than 120,000—that he soon set up shop in Show Low, followed by Springerville, Holbrook, and Winslow, too.



**HEART SMART** Prior to 1995, there were no cardiologists in northeastern Arizona until one showed up in Show Low in the late '90s. Mehta replaced him in 1999 and now operates clinics in Springerville, Show Low, Winslow, and Holbrook.

Within a year of that first visit, Mehta found that fully half his practice, still technically located in Metro Phoenix, was tending to people from these areas.

Many of these rural patients also were sicker than his urban patients—simply because they were farther from a doctor. “If you’re in the city and you’re a few blocks away from a cardiologist and you have a little twitch in your chest, you might go in and get it checked out,” he says. “People here weren’t going to drive all the way to Phoenix or Tucson.”

But thanks to Mehta’s fly-in services, they no longer had to make the four-hour road trip.

“We would see 12 to 16 patients in three to four hours,” recalls Mehta’s finance director, Lynda Lange, who assisted with patient charting during his early visits. Clad in jeans and armed only with a stethoscope, Mehta began making a difference in the lives of people who simply couldn’t afford trips to larger cities for the necessary care.

The jeans, he says, were a conscious decision. “I wanted to put patients at ease. Suits and ties were not going to help them relax.” But Mehta’s attentive bedside manner did.

“He will take the time to put a case in the patient’s language, explaining what the procedure will involve and what he’ll need to do,” says Trish O’Keefe-Shuey, a registered nurse who assists Mehta during cardiac procedures. “I have worked with many cardiologists during my 23 years as a nurse, and Dr. Mehta’s personality, approachability, and knowledge base are wonderful.”

*Melissa Crytzer Fry is a Phoenix-based freelance writer. This is her first contribution to Arizona Monthly.*

Although there are four hospitals in the region—Navapache Regional Medical Center in Show Low, Winslow Memorial Hospital, White Mountain Regional Medical Center in Springerville, and Indian Health Services in Whiteriver, which provides health care for the White Mountain Apache Reservation—none of them had cardiac facilities at the time. Patients had to travel to Thunderbird Samaritan Medical Center in Glendale for invasive procedures such as angioplasty and pacemaker surgeries, the insertion of drug-coated stents to widen arteries, or rotoblator operations to clear plaque from clogged coronary arteries. (In a balloon angioplasty operation—Mehta's specialty—a thin catheter containing a balloon and a metal stent is guided through the clogged artery. When the balloon is inflated, it expands the metal stent, which acts as a scaffold to open the artery.)

So how does a big-city cardiologist who enjoys scuba diving, safaris on Africa's Serengeti Plain, and metropolitan life come to live in a small town perched on Arizona's Mogollon Rim?

"There's still, unfortunately, this misperception that you have to be in the city to do good work," Mehta says, insisting that rural patients are no less important than urban patients. "I argue that this is really where we can make a difference as doctors."

WHEN MEHTA FIRST TOOK HIS PRACTICE TO THE AIR, HE SPENT ONE DAY A WEEK—roughly 200 hours of flying time each year—visiting clinics in his then-rented single-engine Cessna. He maintained this solo routine until 2000, when he began recruiting additional cardiologists.

Today, Mehta's clinics employ two additional cardiologists, although he claims he needs five or six more to meet the ideal cardiologist-to-patient ratio—which in 2005, according to Theodore Fraker, president of the American College of Cardiology, is 6.51 per 100,000 people. However, Mehta calls the degree of difficulty he's faced recruiting cardiologists an 8 on a scale of 1 to 10. In the city he estimates it's 3 or 4.

No stranger to accelerated paces, the plane enthusiast—who graduated from high school at age 16 and from Northeastern Ohio University's College of Medicine at age 22—has taken the growth in stride. "I had a five- to ten-year plan already laid out when I came up here," he says of Show Low, the place he has considered home base since filling the city's vacant cardiologist position in 1999. That move was step one of his master plan.

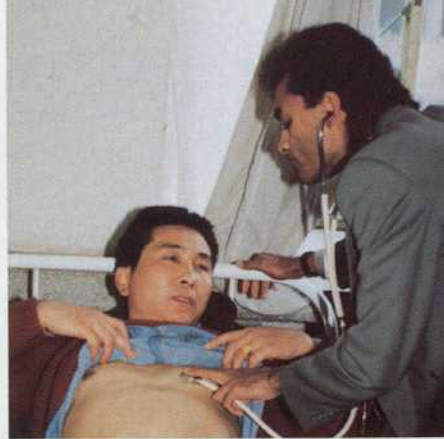
It also led to one of the gutsiest medical decisions of Mehta's career. While in Pinetop, a patient named Don Goebel suffered a heart attack while under his care, but the weather was so bad Goebel couldn't be flown down to Phoenix for the surgery he desperately needed. So it was on December 4, 2000, Mehta performed Show Low's first-ever angioplasty in the only space available: a mini-mobile trailer outside the hospital.

"We had no choice, despite the fact that we had the wrong equipment, the wrong facility, and poor timing," Mehta says.

Using cardiac equipment that just happened to be in the surgical trailer, the desperate doctor opened the blocked artery that was causing the heart attack and stabilized Goebel for evacuation later that day to Thunderbird Samaritan, where he underwent quadruple bypass surgery.

"I am very grateful to Dr. Mehta," says the retired mechanical engineer-turned-real estate agent, now 72. He recalls that even the surgeon who did his bypass surgery was impressed, telling him, "That was a very gutsy thing Dr. Mehta did. You owe your life to his performance."

A private pilot himself, Goebel adds, "Dr. Mehta brought the expertise to the mountain that we needed. We're all glad to see what he's doing." Since his heart attack, Goebel says he is in excellent health despite some muscle damage to his heart that he conditions with a



**DOCTOR DO-GOODER** In 1992, Mehta traveled throughout China (this page), demonstrating the laser coronary angioplasty procedure. Before Mehta's flights to northeastern Arizona (opposite), rural patients paid \$3,000-\$7,000 for air evacuations to hospitals in Phoenix, which were not typically covered by Medicare.



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thrice-weekly cardiac rehabilitation workout.

Today, cardiac patients in Show Low experience a setting much different than the one Goebel endured. Compliments of Mehta, they have the best in modern technology. In 2003, he funded the construction of a cardiac catheterization lab and bought all the equipment in it—step two of his plan. (Cottonwood, Verde Valley, and Flagstaff have recently established cardiac cath labs, although they aren't accepting referrals from other towns because their current load is too great.)

Now patients in need of cardiac procedures who previously traveled to Mehta's Phoenix practice can remain in Show Low.

“Our heart center is state-of-the-art,” says Mehta, whose Heart Clinic of Northeastern Arizona has handled 700 patient visits since opening almost two years ago—a 20 percent higher volume than anticipated. “I would put our program results up against the results of any program in the country,” he says.

Although he holds the distinction of being the first Arizona physician to privately fund a program of this caliber, the 42-year-old Mehta views the investment simply as a way to reach more patients. Incidentally, he could have purchased 10 Cessna single-engine planes for the same price or invested in any number of less risky ventures.

Fortunately for Arizona's cardiac patients, though, Mehta chose to invest in his dream.

“A cath lab is unique to a rural community,” says Show Low Mayor Rick Fernau. “I don't know of any other place in the rural Southwest that possesses a lab of this caliber. It has changed a lot of people's lives and has caused those who are considering retiring to look a little more favorably on the White Mountains.”

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WHILE MEHTA'S AIR TIME HAS DECREASED SINCE HE OPENED THE HEART Center—with many patients coming to him in the earlier and less severe stages of heart disease—he foresees an acceleration of his airborne visits in the future as he prepares to meet the needs of additional rural communities in and beyond Arizona. Mehta and his team are currently establishing a new clinic in Reserve, New Mexico, and will resurrect clinics in Overgaard and Winslow that were closed as result of wildfires and staff shortages.

While opening new fly-in clinics, the goal-oriented Mehta is simultaneously launching step three of his plan, building a cardiac care center that will allow patients to receive all treatments in Show Low, including open-heart surgery. "We're looking at a design that includes clinical space to see patients; space for diagnostic testing; surgical space; and a wellness and preventative-care area—all under one roof," Mehta says. He expects the office space to be finished in 2005 and the surgery center to be completed in 2007.

"In the future, there should be nothing we should send a cardiac patient off the mountain for," he says. The surgical center will be visionary—one of only a few nationally to embrace complementary medicine, including homeopathic remedies, massage, and meditation.

Such a bold move is not surprising for Mehta, who has always been ahead of the curve. Even his fascination with medicine began early. "As a child, I remember sitting on the counter, watching my dad work," recalls Mehta of his physician father, a pathologist. "I was always interested and remember looking through the microscopes." Mehta wasn't the only family member to follow suit, either. Two of his three sisters also chose the medical profession.

Mehta's fast-track persona also earned him a private pilot's license in only three months—while he was completing his residency. And he showed musical aptitude at age four when he began playing guitar on his mom's frying pans.

Today, he's the lead singer and bass player in a classic rock band that includes the chief financial officer of Navapache Regional Medical Center, a general surgeon, and a high school music teacher. The group, Full Arrest, plays a repertoire of '70s and '80s songs—including popular tunes from the Eagles, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Van Halen. The group recently performed a Halloween gig for a 200-plus crowd in Paradise Valley.

Mehta is modest about his life experiences, though. When he lived in Ohio, he was the backstage physician for a local promotion company, providing medical services, if needed, to musical performers, including Peter Gabriel and Tom Petty.

And while Mehta admits to frequently stealing away in his plane to California and Arizona's metropolitan areas, he's developed a soft spot for the White Mountains. "There's always been something about Arizona that I really enjoy, the mountains in particular. I mean, this part of the state, I just absolutely love."

His patients and co-workers seem to have taken to him, too. As it turns out, residents living among the White Mountains have no difficulty trusting a big-city doctor who is as grounded as Mehta.

Perhaps the biggest testament to this trust is illustrated by co-worker, Lange, who admits she really is afraid of flying. "When you get in the air, there's that trust," she says of Mehta's piloting skills. "You know this man. You don't fear. I would fly with him any time." ■