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TRIB TOTAL MEDIA

A million well-wishers, 15 doctors point guru to Pittsburgh

The Jain leader got followers' OK to fly from India for brain surgery.

BY ALLISON M. HEINRICHS
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

In a six-hour brain surgery pioneered in Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center doctors restored sight to a man whose followers consider him to be a living god.

Acharya Yashovijaysuri, a guru of Jainism, one of the world's oldest religions, was discharged from UPMC Presbyterian on Wednesday. Neurosurgeons removed a golf ball-sized tumor from deep in his brain Friday by pulling it through his nose.

"I'm very, very pleased," said Yashovijaysuri, 63, of Gujarat, India. "My eyesight has progressed more than expected."

Since age 11, Yashovijaysuri has devoted himself to the Jain religion, centered in India. Its basic tenets are nonviolence, open-mindedness and a lack of ma-

terialism. To avoid killing anything, Yashovijaysuri sweeps the ground before he steps, is vegetarian and doesn't wear clothing that is sewn because stitching could harm micro-organisms.

Several years ago, he lost sight in his left eye. He was beginning to lose vision in his right eye when Jain follower Dinesh Mehta, a retired oncologist in Antwerp, Belgium, learned about the problem from other followers.

SEE GURU • A4



Acharya Yashovijaysuri, a guru of the ancient religion of Jainism, recovers after successful brain surgery in UPMC Presbyterian to remove a tumor and restore his sight.

JUSTIN MERRIMAN/
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Guru pointed toward Pittsburgh

GURU • FROM A1

"He would never complain about it himself," Mehta said. "He doesn't care for his own life."

Mehta persuaded Yashovijaysuri to get a brain scan, which showed a growing, noncancerous tumor pushing on his optic nerve. Doctors in India opened his skull but couldn't remove the tumor because it was deep, fibrous and fed by blood vessels.

Mehta consulted medical colleagues who suggested a technique pioneered by UPMC neurosurgeon Amin Kassam. It allows surgeons to reach and remove a tumor through a patient's nostril and sinus cavity, using tiny knives, clamps and cameras.

Mehta and fellow Jain follower Shrikant Parikh of Houston researched the surgery.

"I went to 15 doctors, and they all pointed us to Pittsburgh," said Parikh.

One problem: Yashovijaysuri had never traveled by a method other than foot because he cannot clear the path before him of insects or micro-organisms if he rides by car, bicycle, train, plane or boat.

Mehta and Parikh persuaded Yashovijaysuri's 1 million followers to grant the guru permission to fly to Pittsburgh for surgery. The Jain community raised money for the trip and operation.

With assistance from Kassam and Dr. Paul Gardner, co-director of UPMC's Center for Skull Base Surgery, Dr. Daniel Prevedello removed Yashovijaysuri's tumor.

"In this situation, you want to make sure everything goes perfectly," said Prevedello, associate director of exovascular neurosurgery at UPMC. "But it wasn't any different for me than any other surgery — they're all just as important — and when I was doing the procedure, I just focused on that."

For the next year, Yashovijaysuri will regain vision. That's important to him, because he is an avid reader and has written more than a dozen books about Jainism. Color-blind before the operation, Yashovijaysuri now can see in a range of hues.

Mehta said Yashovijaysuri agreed to the operation only because he wanted to be open-

minded to the desires of the Jain community. When he returns home, he likely will fast to repent for any lives — including bacteria — killed by his plane ride and car trips.

"He is only traveling for this medical mission," said Vinod Doshi of Monroeville, who attends the Hindu Jain Temple in Monroeville with about 60 Jain families. "He will not preach, he will not go to temple, he will not do anything that isn't related to his medical care."

"It is a true credit to us in Pittsburgh that he has come here for his care," Doshi said. "Pittsburgh has become so famous in India. Every day we're getting calls from his followers, asking how he is doing."



Dr. Daniel Prevedello led a team of doctors who removed a tumor pressing on Acharya Yashovijaysuri's optic nerve. Color blind before the operation, Yashovijaysuri can now see in a range of hues.