



RAY STANFORD

The American Geriatrics Society chose Niharika Suchak as its latest Clinician of the Year.

## 'A clinician extraordinaire'

Dr. Niharika Suchak grew up in India, a country famous for revering its elders. Her aging parents have lived with her for 10 years. As the American Geriatrics Society's newest Clinician of the Year, she is a national spokeswoman for the passionate care of seniors.

Yet at first she had no desire to pursue geriatrics. In fact, she explored it during her internal-medicine residency only because seniors' interwoven medical complexities made her feel uncomfortable and incompetent.

So this physician with the melodious voice ended up in a two-year geriatrics fellowship. Which is how geriatrics became her passion. Which is why she joined the Florida State University College of Medicine, with its separate geriatrics department, its elder-friendly mission statement and a curriculum that teaches all students the basics of geriatric medicine.

Now she's also a star. She was nominated by one of her mentors, Dr. Knight Steel, a founding father of U.S. geriatrics.

"Niharika is a clinician extraordinaire," Steel said. "She has seemingly unlimited medical wisdom, knowing both the conclusions of innumerable studies and information about what may

make the results relevant or not relevant for the patient under discussion. Possessing the most elegant bedside manner as well, she clearly defines that term for all house staff and students. If all physicians could model themselves after Niharika, medicine would be the most wonderful profession that it is struggling to be."

What Suchak loves about geriatrics is the profound sense of satisfaction from touching each individual's life. "Probably every physician could say that," she acknowledged, "but here we treat the patient *and* the family, or the caregiver."

One grateful caregiver is Regina Ohanian of River Edge, N.J., who praises Suchak's care of her mother, Dorothy Ekizian.

"She treated the whole person, prioritizing treatment objectives, relating calmly, compassionately and respectfully to my mother, and to me as primary caregiver," Ohanian said. "She patiently answered all my questions, educating me so I could in turn help my mother. Her medical expertise was exceeded only by her humility." Ohanian's mother died in 2008, "but the memory of how beautifully she was cared for by Dr. Suchak comforts me to this day. Florida State

medical students are blessed to have her as a mentor."

This mentor knows that some medical students think seniors are all frail, all alike, all boring. Not so, she insists. She's grateful that her mentors from Johns Hopkins and Union Memorial Hospital in Baltimore opened her eyes to the medical and personal riches within her older patients.

Suchak, who has the Indian equivalent of an M.D. degree, came to the College of Medicine in early 2011 from the Hackensack University Medical Center. Though she feels undeserving of the Clinician of the Year award, she does have a message for her colleagues nationwide: "Each contact with a patient – or student – can be a life-changing experience. Even though we may have cynicism about how long it may take systems to evolve, I still feel that each individual encounter should be treated with the utmost respect and sincerity."

As an informed caregiver in her own family, she knows the joys and challenges. Her parents have their own physician, so she intervenes only when necessary. Otherwise, as with her patients, she promotes self-care. And her parents, she said with a smile, are excellent learners.