

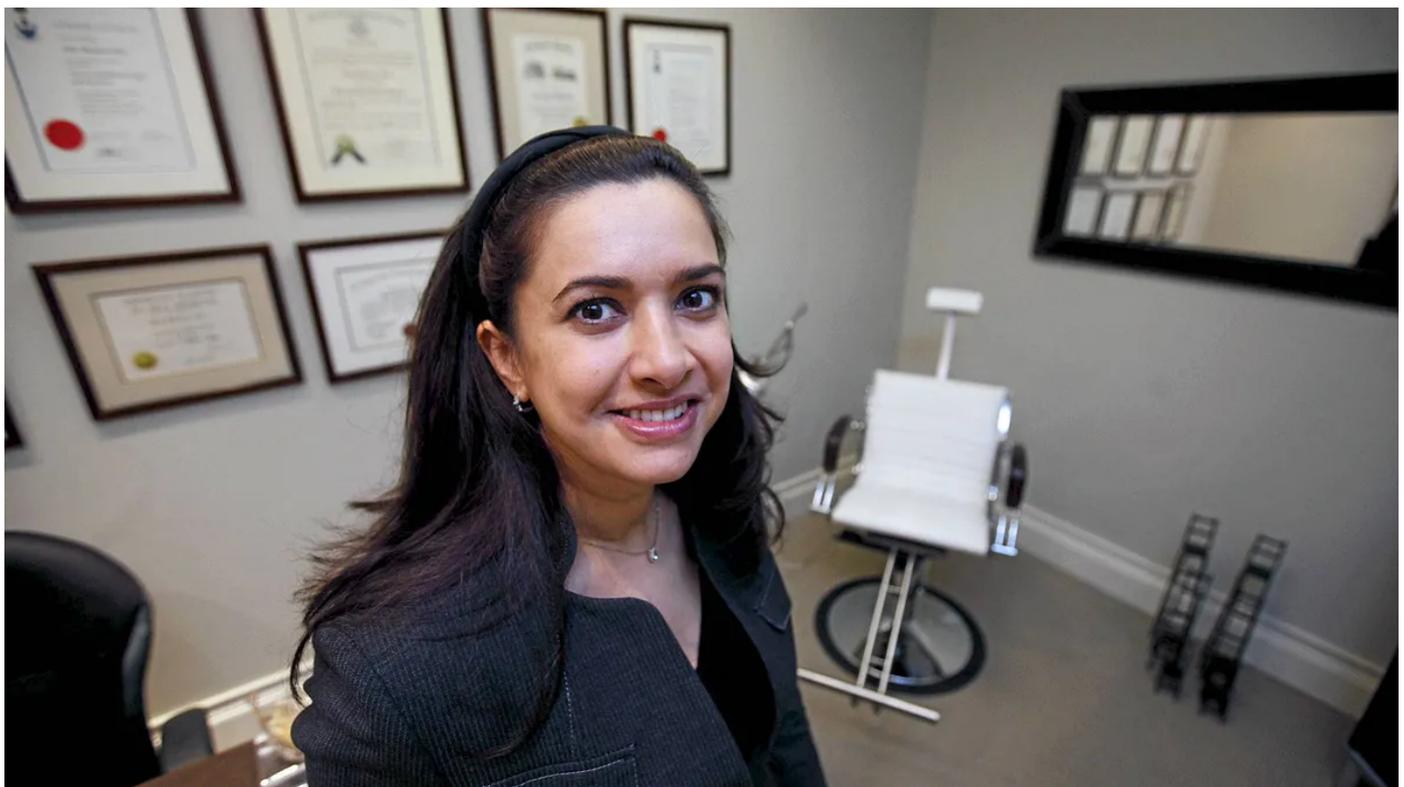


Foundation provides free dental treatment to abused women

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Dr. Tina Maisami

Toronto. The office is clean and bright, decorated with loose, colourful drawings of faces, most of them women. Behind the reception area are tribal masks she began collecting during a fellowship in Johannesburg to complete her training after graduation from the University of Toronto.

It's clear that she is the kind of woman who believes she can do a lot about many things, if she sets her mind to it. Her practice employs seven people. She is on call every fourth night at Etobicoke General Hospital, where she is a staff surgeon, performing operations for dentofacial deformities and facial trauma.

Eight months ago, she had her first child, a daughter named Jia. Until one month before she gave birth, she was performing surgeries. She only took three months off before returning to work.

Married for three years, she met her husband, Matt Ratto, a professor in the faculty of information at the University of Toronto, online after her mother worried that she was working too hard. "How is a man supposed to find you?" her mother asked. Dr. Meisami knew what to do.

So, when her brother, Borna, died, she knew what to do then too: make something positive out of his influence on her. He was also a doctor, an orthopedic surgeon. "He was an old soul, wise beyond his years," she says.

Two years ago, on International Women's Day, she initiated the Dr. Borna Meisami Commemorative Foundation with four of her female dental colleagues, who have been friends since studying at U of T. They provide free dental and orthodontic treatment to abused women in the Toronto area. "Rebuild a smile, empower a woman, restore her life" is their slogan

seated on sofas and chairs around Dr. Meisami are her colleagues, who donate their services to the foundation. Several tell the stories of the women they have treated and the transformation that ensues. "Depression and anxiety issues can sometimes be solved by doing something as simple as fixing someone's teeth," says Maureen Fenn, a family dentist.

Many of the patients are single mothers. "They put their children first, and they're on the back burner," Dr. Meisami says. "We are all care providers," she adds, looking to her colleagues. "There's something in all of us to want to take care of people and please others."

She points out that "these are women who because of their situation are not used to being looked after. But this says to them, 'I matter. My needs are relevant.' It's empowering them to be confident again."

Many get jobs. They enter into healthier relationships. "The face is the centre of the human being," Dr. Meisami explains. "People assess you by how you look. And there's a stigma associated with someone who has teeth that are missing, discoloured or broken."

The interest in women's issues comes from her background, growing up in Tehran, where she was born. "It's very matriarchal. My mother ruled the household," she laughs. "Iranian culture admires women. It's not what you see on TV," she says.

With her parents and brother, she immigrated to Toronto in 1983. "My brother at 16 would have been enlisted for the [Iran-Iraq] war. And so my parents quickly got us out."

Her father, Iraj, now retired, was a gynecologist. "He always used to say to me, 'You get to be a mother!' He knew how great that would be. In Iran, we have an expression that means, 'Heaven lies beneath a mother's feet.' "

Her brother was sympathetic to women's causes. "He taught me all my feminist ideals." she

MOST OF THE FEMALE DENTISTS AND ORTHODONTISTS WHO WORK WITH HER — DR. FEMI, JOSIE MARCIANO, Shiva Shadmand, Renu Varshney, Yasmin Mawji and Amelia Deliakis — knew her brother. But they also have an interest in promoting women's issues for professional reasons. "We're all in jobs that are dominated by men," one says.

While more and more women are studying dentistry in schools, there are still challenges for women in the field. "You're looked down upon as a female medical resident. You don't complain about menstrual cramps or anything like that. We all feel fortunate because we had supportive families," Dr. Meisami says as the women nod in agreement.

The foundation gets in-kind donations from suppliers of dental materials such as implants, but otherwise the doctors cover the costs of their services themselves. They are hoping to enlist the help of the Canadian Women's Foundation to identify abused women in need.

"There is no [government] program to help with dental needs for this forgotten group of women, many of whom fall easily into poverty when they're in abusive relationships," Dr. Meisami notes, referring to typewritten notes to outline the statistics of violence against women in Canada.

On average, every six days a woman in Canada is killed by her intimate partner. On any given day, more than 3,000 women, along with 2,500 children, are living in an emergency shelter to escape domestic violence.

Ever diligent and willing to help, Dr. Meisami ends the interview by handing over her notes. "So you have the spelling for everyone's name," she says, smiling.

And then she notices that my pen has been leaking on my hands. "All over your nice red nail polish," she observes with both doctorly and feminine concern. "A little bit of alcohol will fix that, you know."