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No prescription, no monitoring, no nothing!

Absence of accountability breeds incompetence

A report by this newspaper on Monday again pierced the myth that we have somewhat of a decently working healthcare sector, albeit from a unique angle. Despite a court directive to stop over-the-counter sale of antibiotics, the health authorities have not only failed to follow up on the order, but seem completely lost at sea as to what to do.

A recent joint study by the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA) and the WHO shows that antibiotics consumption in Bangladesh has increased by 30.81 percent in the last two years. Overuse of antibiotics has given rise to the danger of superbugs throughout the world that cause some seven lakh deaths globally per year. Yet, our health authorities, as if unaware of these facts, have failed to do anything at all to raise awareness among the general populace about the dangers of over- or wrong use of antibiotics.

According to experts, the problem lies in the fact that people don't know which drugs are antibiotics, meaning, people are taking antibiotics daily without even knowing about it. On April 25, the HC ordered the DGDA to take steps to stop the over-the-counter sale of antibiotics. Accordingly, all that the DGDA has done so far is issue a notice in May to all district commissioners and civil surgeons, followed by a reminder a month later.

Such apathy on the part of the DGDA is completely unacceptable. According to WHO estimates, 10 million people could die from superbugs by 2050 if the overuse of antibiotics go unchecked. And as this newspaper discovered during its investigation, hundreds if not more, stores across the country are selling antibiotics at whim without any doctor's prescription.

The reason why pharmaceuticals have been able to get away with this practice is the lack of monitoring by the health authorities. It is time for those responsible within the health ministry and DGDA to be held accountable for letting things spiral onto this point. And for the health authorities to finally start doing their job.

An amazing alternative to polythene

More companies should come forward to produce biodegradable bags

It is heartening that a local company in Bangladesh has been producing biodegradable packaging materials and bags from corn, a rather unlikely source material. Unlike polythene bags, which survive in the soil for several hundred years and have devastating impacts on the environment, these bags are "compostable," do not contain any heavy metal, and are thus environment-friendly. Apart from the packaging materials, the company has also been producing shirt clips, collar stays, hang tags, and hangers from the corn fibre.

Although polythene bags were banned in Bangladesh in 2002, successive governments have failed miserably to enforce the ban. And it is easily understandable why—there has not been any suitable alternative to these bags all these years. Although the government took some initiatives to encourage the use of jute bags, unfortunately, they could not popularise it.

According to the Earth Day Network of USA (2018), Bangladesh is the 10th most plastic polluting country in the world. Plastic contributes eight percent of the country's waste, which is equivalent to 800,000 tonnes. Of these, around 200,000 tonnes go into the ocean and rivers, posing a serious threat to the marine ecosystem.

Under the circumstances, if we want to fight the menace of plastic pollution, there is no alternative to encouraging the use of biodegradable bags. Apart from the bags made from other biodegradable materials, we also need to encourage the use of jute bags, which would help revive our ailing jute sector.

Only last week, the High Court directed the government authorities concerned to ban single-use plastic products in the coastal areas and hotels, motels and restaurants across the country. The HC has also directed the government to strictly enforce the legal ban on polythene. We hope this time the government will comply with the directives. Needless to say, if more companies come forward to produce biodegradable bags and packaging materials for the local market, enforcing the ban will be much easier.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Sex education must be compulsory

Sex education is still considered a taboo in our society. It is not discussed as much as it needs to be across most of our educational institutions, often leading to major misconceptions regarding this, especially amongst the youth. Add to that the widespread exposure of pornography and the portrayal of hypersexuality in the media, and it results in the alarming rise in sexual abuse and rape that continues to run rampant. The lack of proper sexual education has led many people to make ignorant and unhealthy decisions in their lives.

Therefore, dissemination of correct information about reproduction, human sexual anatomy, sexuality, sexual activity, reproductive rights, birth control, emotional relations and responsibilities, age of consent and privacy, among other issues, have become indispensable. It is high time that parents and the concerned authorities alike introduce our children to sex education at home and schools so that they are well aware about the subject which will in turn help prevent severe social and health consequences.

Sabina Sultana, by email

The rapes that don't matter



ZYMA ISLAM

A photo taken at the recent protests against rape has been making the rounds on social media. In the image, a tea-seller named Abdul Jalil Shwapan—or "Shwapan Mama" as he is fondly known to the students of the campus—holds up a placard demanding death for the rapists of both the DU student whose rape has shaken up the system, as well as that of his own child.

His daughter, aged 20, who also happens to be speech-impaired, was raped in 2018 by her 55-year-old neighbour. The rape accused was released on bail and has now lodged a burglary case against Shwapan Mama. The case rolls on while Shwapan Mama braves the winter to demand justice for his daughter, along with the other daughters of the country.

This, unfortunately, is what happens to most rape cases in the country—nothing.

You see, right now, good times prevail. One gets raped, and the rapist is caught within a record 48 hours—as happened in the case of the DU rape victim, or within 24 hours—as in the cases of the Dhamrai ceramic factory worker and the girl gang-raped in Kamrangirchar. Law enforcers are leaving no stone unturned in finding rapists as soon as the incidents are reported. It is a truly commendable attitude that is bringing much reassurance to the lives of the survivors.

But I can't help but wonder where this pro-survivor, go-getter attitude was when Priyanka Rani Davnath was raped. She did not have a nation rallying for her, and so found herself trying to move a system that had little willingness to be moved.

Last year the *Star Weekend* magazine published an article about her struggle for justice titled "The Burden of Proof" to demonstrate just how difficult it is for rape survivors to navigate the system. Raped, traumatised and bleeding, Priyanka had delivered herself to Dhaka Medical College Hospital right after the incident for DNA testing. She pushed her investigating officer (IO) for months to find the rapists, even as he abused his position to flirt with her. She convinced the police station to change her IO to a female one so that she could stop being harassed by the very cop assigned to investigate her case. Seeing no progress even after three months, Priyanka organised a press conference where male journalists showed up to ask her gory details about the rape, and finally dismissed her as incoherent and not newsworthy.

There's more. Her new IO was hardly

proactive. Instead, she asked her to find out where her rapist lives—even though the rapist could easily have been tracked using his phone number. Priyanka went on to the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI) to request them to take over her case. To their credit, they did, but they also told Priyanka to create a fake online personality, befriend her rapist, and lure him to a location to be arrested. And so, she did, reliving the trauma of communicating for several months with the man who had violated her. She cornered the man in a previously agreed-upon location, where the police were hiding, and he was finally caught.

I will not forget the way she burst into loud tears of relief in the middle of a busy

room. Meanwhile, other rape survivors sat around with their families and IOs in the ground floor parking lot of the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Court, or hung out in the balconies outside the courtrooms waiting for their turn at justice.

While the state's efforts to be sensitive to the DU rape survivor is definitely to be lauded, we must ask why the same is not being accorded to the other cases where there isn't public scrutiny. The state itself is setting the standard, showing what they are capable of doing when they have the political will to do so. Then why does it not?

We understand that the perpetrator is a serial rapist. So, we entreat the law enforcers to take his DNA sample and suspects in this case are going free because they are more than just addled junkies from the street—why else have Tonu's rapists not been arrested in four years, even when their DNA is available?

The fact that the state got a DNA match as soon as possible in the case of the DU rape survivor is also an anomaly. As Fahmida Akhter, lawyer of the One Stop Crisis Centre (OCC), says, "It takes more than a month for the medical report of most rape victims to be submitted."

"Since the process can be quite lengthy, many victims cannot keep up and choose to settle out-of-court, leaving the rapist free from imprisonment," Akhter says. A *Prothom Alo* investigation from 2018 found out that 41 percent of the



PHOTO: COLLECTED

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Dhaka street as she watched her rapist being shoved into a police van. At least a part of the exhausting marathon for justice had just come to an end for her—now onto the next of fighting the court battle.

And let's not even get into the case of Sohagi Jahan Tonu, who was gang-raped and left to die in May of 2016. Her body was exhumed and she went through two rounds of DNA testing, while masses of people took to the streets and social media with hashtags like #justicefortonu. They found three distinct DNA samples on her... and that is where the case stopped, buried deep in the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), one of the elite investigation agencies in the country.

One has to wonder whether the

legal cases at the Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunal lost steam through the judicial process. "[The survivors] receive money from the rapists or they are threatened into withdrawing the case. There are even cases of rape survivors being married off to their rapists," explains Akhter.

It must also be said that—while being very commendable—there is a distinct difference in how the state has dealt with the DU rape survivor, and the kind of experience other rape survivors go through.

Even last Thursday, when the rapist Majnu and the DU rape survivor were being brought to court, the court took special measures to protect the girl from trauma. They hid her under a *burkha* and stealthily sneaked her into a magistrate's

match it with the DNA records of past OCC victims to see if there are any matches. Interrogate him and make him identify the women he has preyed upon. Go to his victims—the beggars and the mentally-disabled who do not have the whole nation protesting for them or who do not report their rape to the OCC—and tell them their rapist has been caught. Tell them that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Prove to the women of this country that the law enforcers are not solving this case as a PR stunt, or to stop the public from protesting, but because they actually care about bringing an end to rape.

Do this, why don't you?

Zyma Islam is a journalist at *The Daily Star*.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Erdogan wades into the Libyan quagmire



JOHN ANDREWS

FOREIGN critics of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan deride him as a quasi-dictatorial megalomaniac. But Erdogan—who was Turkey's prime minister for 11 years before being elected president in 2014—is now a reckless gambler, too. In short order, Turkey will send troops to Libya at the request of the United Nations-backed Government of National

Accord (GNA), which has been besieged in Tripoli for the last eight months by the advancing forces of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA).

This will be a military and diplomatic folly. Erdogan already has the distressing example of the Syrian conflict on Turkey's own doorstep. Does he really imagine that sending a few hundred—or even many thousand—Turkish troops to aid the beleaguered GNA will somehow resolve Libya's tragic and bloody turmoil, itself the result of the 2011 intervention by foreign powers that toppled Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's regime?

If Erdogan expects either a GNA victory or an imminent peace settlement,

he is deluding himself. Haftar's well-equipped LNA has the support of Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and (at least covertly) France. With mercenaries from Russia and Sudan on his side, Haftar must feel rather more optimistic than Fayeze al-Sarraj, the GNA's prime minister. Support for the GNA from Turkey and Qatar, along with the fig leaf of UN recognition, weighs rather less in the military balance.

So, what explains Turkey's entry into Libya's dreadful conflict as yet another proxy warrior? One factor, often baffling to outsiders, is the ideological and political influence throughout the Middle East—or at least its Sunni Muslim

Turkey—specifically, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP)—and tiny Qatar (very much at odds with neighbouring Saudi Arabia) view the Brotherhood with enthusiasm rather than alarm. On the almost frivolous premise that my enemy's enemy is my friend, the fact that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt support Haftar is excuse enough for Turkey and Qatar to support Sarraj and the GNA.

The bigger reason for Erdogan's adventurism in Libya, though, is that it fits his desire for Turkey to play a determining role in its region for the first time since the demise of the Ottoman empire (of which Libya was once a

influence abroad, but under the slogan "zero problems with our neighbours."

How ironic, then, that Erdogan has created problems with almost all of his neighbours. The EU cannot accept Turkey's appalling record on human rights, especially following the military's failed coup attempt of 2016. Israel cannot abide Turkey's support for Hamas (which is aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood) in Gaza. And virtually everyone is exasperated by Turkey's policy in Syria, which features attacking the Kurds—the most effective fighters against the Islamic State—and ambivalence towards several jihadist groups. Significantly, Davutoglu has broken with Erdogan and formed a rival political party.

True, Erdogan's supporters can justifiably argue that Turkey has become a regional player to be reckoned with. The EU has to be financially generous, or else Turkey may let hundreds of thousands of Syrian and other refugees from war and poverty flood into Europe. Russia and Iran, which both support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, recognise that a settlement of the Syrian conflict will depend on Turkey's acquiescence—hence the continuing three-party peace process that began three years ago in Astana, Kazakhstan. Even the United States under President Donald Trump has had to eat a slice of humble pie: Turkey, regardless of NATO sensitivities and American economic threats, stands by its decision to buy a Russian air-defence system.

But the Libyan venture may be a step too far. On December 5, the Turkish parliament ratified an agreement between Erdogan and Sarraj that sets a maritime border between their two countries. The Turkish-Libyan deal ignores international law—as the EU, Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt have pointed out. It also ignores geography, because the Greek island of Crete lies halfway between the two countries. And it threatens the January 2019 agreement between Egypt, Israel, Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority to exploit the gas reserves of the eastern Mediterranean.

Erdogan is the epitome of today's strongman political leader. But by the time his Libyan gamble sours, as it inevitably will, he will have run out of both luck and friends.

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PHOTO: AFP

Turkey begins deploying troops to Libya.

parts—of the Muslim Brotherhood. Founded in Egypt almost a century ago, the Brotherhood favours a transition (peaceful, it has always maintained) to theocratic government. As its slogan proclaims, "Islam is the solution."

That is a problem for the ruling families of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, all of which regard the Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation seeking to undermine their power. So, too, does the oppressive Egyptian regime led by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who mounted the 2013 military coup that ended the Brotherhood's disastrous year governing the Arab world's most populous country. Only

part). On the surface, that ambition sounds reasonable enough. Turkey has a population of more than 80 million, the second-largest military in NATO, and a relatively developed economy. It deserves to be treated with respect—which is why the European Union's obvious reluctance to advance the country's membership bid is a blow to Turkish pride.

But Turkey's pursuit of its regional leadership ambition has come at a high cost. When the AKP came to power in Turkey almost two decades ago, Erdogan's mentor was Ahmet Davutoglu, an academic who then became foreign minister and eventually prime minister. Davutoglu was keen to expand Turkey's