

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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Give kidney patients the right to save their lives!

The law shouldn't stop patients from receiving transplants

ACCORDING to the High Court, an estimated 20 million people in the country suffer from some form of kidney disease every year and about 35,000-45,000 of them die of kidney failure. Although the annual demand for kidney transplant is somewhere between 5,000-9,000, only about 120-130 end-stage renal failure patients can find healthy donors and undergo kidney transplant per year.

Among the thousands of patients hoping to receive a kidney transplant is the first blind lawyer of Faridpur Bar Association and a recipient of *The Daily Star* and IPDC Finance's Unsung Women Nation Builders Awards 2020, Marjia Rabbani Shoshi. Marjia has no eligible and willing donor in her immediate and extended family, which means her only option is a nonrelative donor or a cadaveric one. The latter is difficult because of the social taboo about removing organs from the body of a brain-dead patient, while the former cannot be done unless the Organ Transplantation Act 1999 is amended to allow voluntary kidney donations. Last December, the High Court even ordered the government to make such an amendment within six months. Unfortunately, the drafting of the amendment is still only at its primary stage, as this newspaper reported yesterday.

Because the law prohibits voluntary kidney donations, hundreds of Bangladeshis are forced to travel abroad in search of a life-saving kidney transplant. Others have to resort to middlemen and the black market, who convince the economically poor to become donors and take advantage of them, while charging the patients hefty sums of money.

The number of promising lives that are lost every year due to such roadblocks is staggering. And the fact that the government isn't moving quicker to remove them is unacceptable. People like Marjia should not have to wait around indefinitely for the government to slowly reframe the law. They should be able to get a procedure that could save their lives done immediately.

The government needs to urgently amend the Organ Transplantation Act 1999, as per the High Court's directive. It should also launch an awareness campaign so that it becomes more feasible for kidney patients to receive transplants from cadaveric donors.

Why are we failing to take basic precautionary steps?

We risk the health of the whole nation

WHILE we are relieved that two of the three people diagnosed with the coronavirus thus far have already recovered, we are at a loss to understand why our authorities are being so nonchalant about taking precautionary measures to stop a potential outbreak. A report published in this daily on March 12 highlighted a few crucial omissions on the part of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), which may have grave repercussions for the nation. While the institution assured the public that those who came in close contact with the infected ones have been quarantined, they conveniently forgot to mention the crew and passengers on the same flights as the infected persons, who have also been exposed to the virus. Apparently, it took the IEDCR two days to simply reach out to some of these passengers, and we remain unclear whether all of them have yet been tracked down and diagnosed. One can only imagine how much, and how far, the virus could have spread within these few days through these passengers, especially as they may not yet be showcasing any recognisable symptom.

Despite the gravity of the threat, screenings at airports and land ports remain lax, to the point where we are left to wonder: do we even care about stopping this pandemic? Why else are health declaration forms—where passengers are supposed to share information about their recent travel history and whether they have fever, shortness of breath, nausea, headache or cough—being handled so casually? Why are people's body temperatures being read by hand-held infrared thermometers whose readings are unreliable? Why is the airport and aircrafts not being disinfected regularly? Why are there so few trained health officials to handle the influx of passengers, and why are they not wearing protective gears? If it is a matter of inadequate resources, why have we not prioritised the management and control of corona, when the health and welfare of the whole nation depends on it?

We have repeatedly asked the authorities to ensure that all measures are taken to prevent infections from spreading. We understand how daunting that task is; however, there can be no excuse for the failure to implement basic precautionary steps which can at least reduce, if not completely eradicate, the risk of coronavirus to the nation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Not every user is advanced

This daily recently published an editorial titled "Switching from 2G to 5G" which I think was very appropriate. It spoke of how BTRC was in favour of discouraging the use and trade of second generation (2G) mobile phones in order to promote the latest technology (4G/5G). Rushing towards developing communications technology targeted only for the users in the cities is rather an ignorant approach. We, the rural community, barely get any good network coverage, especially when indoors. It would indeed be beneficial if BTRC would enable seamless communication in the rural regions of the country, instead of just assuming that every user is "advanced" and can afford a smart phone.

Anowar Hossin, Shahjahanpur, Bogura

Are we doing enough to combat the coronavirus pandemic?



HABIBULLAH N KARIM

ON Wednesday, the World Health Organization (WHO) formally declared the COVID-19 outbreak a "pandemic". With three confirmed cases of the latest strain of the coronavirus, aka COVID-19, diagnosed on March 7 by the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), Bangladesh has been added to the tally of over 110 countries and territories affected by the scourge that originated in Wuhan, China, and is now sweeping the world. The situation report 49 of the WHO, dated March 9, shows Bangladesh as an affected country. According to the latest WHO situation report, there are now 118,326 confirmed cases of COVID-19 worldwide, with more than four thousand new cases added each day. The report indicates a "very high" risk assessment for the world.

While the infection rate of the virus in China is on the wane, Italy and Iran are getting thrashed under the pressure of rapid rise in the number of infected people, especially in the Lombardy province of Italy which is under complete lockdown with runaway increases in the number of new cases and fatalities for more than a week now. Except the remote

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frozen continent of Antarctica, no other continent could escape the wrath of this easily transmitted virus, and the peak rate of dissemination may still be before us.

The COVID-19 virus is known to spread through tiny droplets ejected by affected people when they sneeze—anyone coming in contact with such



A health worker scans a homebound passenger for signs of fever at a medical desk set up by the Brahmanbaria civil surgeon's office at Akhaura Land Port, on March 10, 2020.

PHOTO: STAR

droplets by inhaling the aerosolised air within close proximity of an infected person or even touching a surface such as chairs, tables or basins, where such tiny droplets might have settled down. In view of this, any crowded place such as classrooms, movie theatres, conferences, train stations, airports, restaurants, places of worship and shopping malls are highly susceptible to becoming purveyors of this nano-organism that can be quite lethal for older people with compromised immune systems and those with underlying medical conditions.

In Bangladesh, the most densely populated country in the world outside of city states such as Singapore, even the street pavements appear crowded all the time; buses, ferries and trains overflow with passengers; and bazaars and "haats" seem to have never-ending human streams where people can feel the breath of others around. In such close encounters—the hallmark of living in densely packed human habitations—coronavirus can literally have a field day every day unless we tackle it with every possible containment measure available at our disposal.

With hundreds of passengers arriving

every day by air from destinations such as Bangkok, Beijing, Kuala Lumpur, Kung Ming, Los Angeles, New York, Rome and Singapore that are designated to be at "high risk" for COVID-19 by WHO, these initial detections in the country may very well be the proverbial tip of the iceberg. Our population density and the poor civic hygiene sense make for a dangerous concoction with the potential for a runaway epidemic. Faced with this nightmarish threat to our public health, it is highly irresponsible to play down—as some self-proclaimed experts did on social media—the threats of the pandemic. The health ministry in collaboration with the ICT ministry needs to proactively monitor and stop the spread of such misleading messages on social media.

The COVID-19 is not just a public health nightmare; the staggering losses on account of stalled economic activities, rocketing healthcare costs and potential food and drugs shortage can cripple life for months to come.

Under these dire circumstances, we must do what we must: 1) take every possible preventive measure—personally, at home, at workplace, on roads and in public places; 2) use this crisis to teach everyone good hygiene practices such as

not spitting or expectorating everywhere; 3) diversify supply sources for raw materials, machinery and consumer goods so that we are not dependent on a single country for the bulk of our imports; 4) set up relief funds for the affected poor and a low-cost working capital fund for affected factories and mills; 5) impose restrictions on travel from the red zones of coronavirus pandemic and carry out proactive screenings of travellers from high-risk countries; 6) bring all land, river and sea border outposts under screening and active surveillance, etc.

We have to accept that coronavirus will eat away at least 1 percent of our GDP, and then work out how we may sustain that loss over the next one year or a longer timeframe. We also have to plan for long-term epidemiological preparedness as an essential mechanism to sustain the shocks of pandemic hazards unbeknownst to the human race. We must realise that diseases need no visa and have no travel restrictions, but we must control their human vectors so that the fallout from any such pandemics can be contained and managed.

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Navigating the bumpy road for startups

KHAN MUHAMMAD SAQIFUL ALAM

THE decade starting from 2010 and ending with 2019 saw the emergence of the growth-through-startup model. The idea originated from Joseph Schumpeter, in 1942—that economies and societies are changed by waves of "creative destruction", with new ideas and innovation changing the way we live. And this was the key idea at the heart of the growth-through-startup model: create an ecosystem in the business world that encourages innovative startups, and when they succeed and grow, they will be employing people and securing investments, leading to economic growth. And to a large extent, this model has been successful in Bangladesh.

Today, nearly everyone uses services that are offered by a few companies that came to play through this startup boost—money transfer, ride sharing, food delivery, e-ticketing. But it has not been a completely rosy picture; there have been countless stories of failures as well. Now that Bangladesh is approaching graduation from the UN's Least Developed Country (LDC) bracket, the country's startups and small enterprises are facing a critical juncture. Strategies and policies made at this point will have long-term repercussions for the future of individual businesses and the economy.

The first and most pressing challenge for startups in the coming future is to scale up and ensure a steady revenue stream. Some companies, such as bKash, Shohoz and Pathao, have managed a steady stream to some extent, but many other startups need to follow. One unique aspect of the startups in Bangladesh has been the fact that their products/services address a structural problem in the market. For example, in the case of bKash, money transfer was a major issue before they came up with their elegant solution. The good thing with innovations aimed at solving a problem facing the majority is that the startup does not need to create the demand. But then, there are quite a lot of startups whose solutions are catered for a niche market, or for whom the gap in the market solution has been filled up by many other similar startups. These startups need to plan on scaling up—connecting to markets to ensure a steady stream of cash.

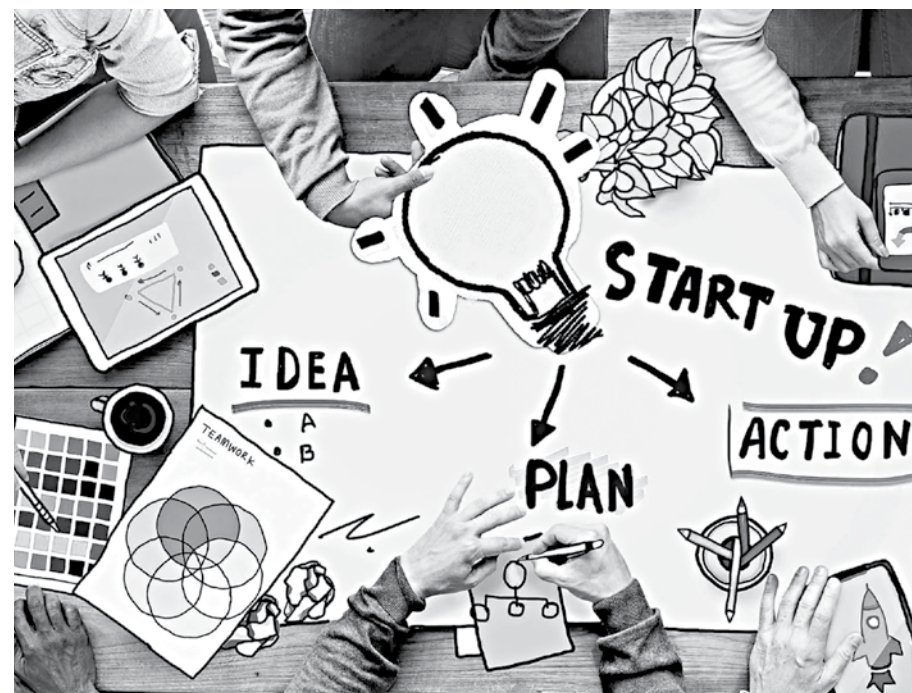
Scaling up can be done through serving

larger customer segments, business-to-business contracts, enhancing the product or service to get out of single niches, improving product quality and reaching out to the international market. The last option is a very important issue to consider for many startups. Since Bangladesh is on its way to graduate from the LDC bracket, it would not be wise to expect international market quotas, in which case it is very important to enhance the product/service to serve international markets.

With scaling up comes the issue of structuring an organisation. Startups are famous for their multi-role positions,

been one major problem faced by many startups in Bangladesh. The reason is simple.

When starting off, the nature of daily tasks is very uncertain, and the founders, along with their team, end up working beyond their roles and their expertise. So when new employees are taken in with clear job roles, it sometimes creates a conflict in the organisational culture, and conversations like "come on, we have done more than this" become commonplace. In fact, a lot of times the organisation's leadership fails to see the value in structure. But when scaling up, this lack of structure will lead to



SOURCE: REUTERS

undefined work structure and ad-hoc challenges. In fact, by definition, this is the type of work that anyone who works for a startup should expect, especially in its nascent stages. And the daily operations are also very ad-hoc at the inception phase. But when an organisation scales up, it scales up in revenue and in employee numbers as well. This is where the need to have structured job roles, standard operating procedures, and routine activities becomes crucial. It might sound very easy but experience shows that this has

mishandling clients and projects. As such, with the aim of scaling up and securing a steady stream of revenue, the startups need to plan for structure within an organisation and having clearly defined roles.

Another crucial issue is innovation, which will also impact the other two issues already discussed. In the initial stages of a startup, innovation mostly comes through understanding a gap in the market and developing a product or service to serve the gap. The initial success of any startup relies on this gap

identification. But after the first set of products or services, the startup needs to enhance its offering to the market. And this is done through incremental innovation. And incremental innovation at times can be quite difficult and costly. This is because the problem—the gap in the market—has been catered for. And at times, the need could be overly catered for. At that point, the company needs to invest in R&D, which is costly and requires dedicated resources—something that needs to come from the second issue discussed in the section above: structure. And this is where the government institutions can help as well.

Supporting industry-academia alliances, R&D clusters and tax-breaks are some of the policy incentives that can help startups to invest in innovation. More importantly, the institutions in place need to work on intellectual property protection rights and proper enforcement. If the innovation can be copied easily and replicated, and protection not enforced, firms will have lesser incentive to innovate, leading to stunted growth and lower competitive power in the international market.

Finally, many global startups have proved that small businesses can accelerate their growth and leapfrog the established large corporations by leveraging data and technology. The pattern of these organisations has been to use a new technology to address a market gap, and then enhance the product offering with insights from data. Quite a few startups in Bangladesh have made proper use of the new technologies and smartphone revolution, but now they have to invest in data-driven insights and decision making. In fact, proper insights from data can give the startups an edge in both scaling up and innovation.

Decisions, policies and strategies made at any critical juncture determines the long-term success of a venture. Therefore, the points and issues highlighted above require further examination and deeper introspection for the future of the startups. If proper steps are taken and are supported by the authorities and institutions involved, today's startups might go a long way in establishing their foothold in the international market.

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