

Our fight with pandemics



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For a lot of us, this current situation that has gripped the world might be frightening. Some of us might be struggling with the behaviour changes we've been asked to adopt, such as social distancing and self-quarantine. However, this is not the first time pandemics have struck our Earth.

Throughout history, time and again outbreaks have taken populations by surprise but human beings have always been able to walk out of the other end, although not completely unscathed but with new lessons that have helped them fight their next battle with the invisible enemy.

Before the advent of global transport networks, outbreaks usually remained contained in specific parts of the world but even in those days there were some diseases that have managed to wipe out civilisations across the world. The bubonic plague was one such disease. This plague was caused by the bacteria *Yersinia pestis* and had managed to travel the world on the back of rats by infected fleas.

The first pandemic caused by this plague is argued to have helped the fall of a Roman empire. The plague infected the emperor Justinian and hence this first pandemic was named after him and called the Plague of Justinian (541-542 AD). During that time, the spreading mostly occurred through sea ports where the infected rats could easily sneak in through the ships. The exact death toll is argued although eventually the disease wiped out about 40 percent of the population of Constantinople (Istanbul today). This disease did not leave our world immediately and the bacteria resurfaced again in the form of the infamous Black Death (1347-1351). This time the disease killed about one third of the European popula-

tion. As far as we know, this particularly fatal bacterium is known to have caused three of the deadliest pandemics in our history.

Flash forward to modern times, outbreaks can spread much more easily now, resulting in pandemics. The most prevalent of them include the cholera and flu pandemics. The 1918 Spanish flu is one of the first unusually dangerous flu pandemics to hit the world which managed to wipe out about a quarter of the world's then population. It was caused by a sub-type of the influenza A virus called the H1N1 influenza virus. Other sub-types of this virus have caused other flu outbreaks such as the Asian flu (1957-1958), Hong Kong flu (1968-1969), and the most recent swine flu (2009).

Now, the question lies, how has the world coped with these pandemics? In the past, people had no idea about the spread of diseases. But when the Black Plague hit Europe in 1347, some of the people realised that getting sick had something to do with being near other sick people and began to stray clear of them. To further prevent the spread, whenever sailors arrived at shores, they were kept inside their ships for 30 days. In Venetian law, this was known as a *quarantino*. Later on, the number of days was increased to 40, or *quarantino*, and this is where we get the word "quarantine" from.

Similar to this, with every new outbreak, humans have found more and more innovative ways to tackle the situation. Smallpox

had been a deadly disease with unusually high mortality rates but this disease resulted in the invention of the vaccine and finally resulted in the complete eradication of a disease for the first time in recorded history. Cholera outbreaks were widespread in the 19th century when an intelligent British doctor named John Snow identified that contamination of the drinking water results in contraction of the disease. He emphasised on protecting drinking water from contamination and we largely have him to thank for improving global sanitation.

With much newer outbreaks such as that of HIV, we have had more knowledge and resources at our disposal. The disease was identified back in the 1980s and what's different with this pandemic is that, here, prevention worked much better than cure. Although there are still no effective vaccines, strategies preventing the spread of the disease have proven highly effective and drugs have been designed to prolong the life of the infected. Between the years 2005 and 2012, the yearly death toll had dropped significantly down to 1.6 million from 2.2 million. Although the disease is still present, it has been successfully contained.

The most recent pandemics have been the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) (2002-2003) and swine flu (2009-2010) outbreaks. One striking difference between the current Covid-19 outbreak

and all the previous outbreaks is the presence of social media. Although social media makes dissemination of information surrounding the disease much easier, it makes the spreading of misinformation just as easy. This results in the population having to fight against both the disease and the rumours surrounding it.

With each of these outbreaks, the health officials and the public find newer ways to cope and also become better prepared for future scenarios. We can always employ these previous lessons we have learnt but it's never easy to accurately predict the trajectory of a current outbreak since all of them are unique. One important lesson we can take away from the Covid-19 outbreak is how crucial personal hygiene such as washing hands can be.

This definitely will not be the last outbreak. With population numbers soaring and climate change, emergence of new diseases will become much more prevalent in the future. Therefore, all we can do is be prepared.

References

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YOUNG PROFESSIONALS AT RISK

SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

Leaving plans and to-do lists on the back burner, uncertainty has taken over the rest of our unmarked days on the calendar. While for many of us it seems like a temporary break from our stream of daily activities, this disruption comes with a high cost to young professionals. Be it the financial hurdles they are having to face right now or the many challenges that await them due to lost time, the youth of Bangladesh is having to prepare for the unknown.

We spoke to a few young professionals about their experiences to better understand the situation they have been dealing with.

TUTORS AND PART-TIME EMPLOYEES

Tutoring is one of the most accessible methods for young people to earn some quick money, especially for students. While commonly perceived as a method of earning a little something extra on the side, it is for some, a way to make livelihoods for oneself and their families. However, with the current shutdown, duties for a tutor have become difficult to deal with.

Abdullah Al Mamun, a third-year Computer Science student of the University of Dhaka lives with his family in the capital's Lalbagh area. His tutoring and his brother's low-paying job are the main sources of income for the family. Under the current shutdown, he has had to dig into his savings to pay for living expenses this month, giving rise to anxiety about his family's expenses for the coming months.

Not only are the tutors struggling with income for the future, many are yet to receive payment for the previous months which could have helped suffice. Hafsa Rashid, a second-year student of North South University and tutor of over three years says, "Due to the current situation, I tried to adapt according to the needs and hence started taking online classes. Sadly, attendance was significantly lower as parents commented they 'did not believe' in online classes even though I had prepared extra notes and materials for the students. I put in more effort in my lectures but have had to deal with parents asking to pay less or none at all for virtual classes since 'it isn't the same'.

She adds, "My income has dropped significantly which would have otherwise helped my family. Unsure of how we may make ends meet in the coming months, I am having to consider dropping a semester as we're already being asked to pre-advise for the next semester's courses."

Apart from tuition opportunities, young people also involve themselves in multiple other part-time jobs. One such individual, Sabreen Alim, barista at a popular cafe in Dhaka, says, "Since we all aren't able to work home due to the nature of the job, we've had to take leave without pay. Some of the senior baristas are still going to work to run the basic activities but as my family lives in Chittagong, I had to come back home and ask for leave earlier than the others."

FRESH GRADUATES AND INTERNS
For those who have just graduated or about to graduate in the near future, the next few months are extremely important. With uncertainty being the only common denominator, all previous plans seem futile and new ones, unapproachable.

"This was the time for us to explore our opportunities and establish ourselves

professionally. Though I was fortunate enough to get recruited by a private company just a week before the shutdown was announced, I had to start working from home even before I got the opportunity to get accustomed to the office environment and understand how things work," says Nikita Riffat, a recent graduate of engineering from North South University.

Not only are the experiences and adjustment being impacted, but some are also struggling to find jobs altogether. Mushfiqur Rahman*, intern at a digital marketing agency, says, "This internship is the last credit requirement, after which I will be done with my undergraduate degree. According to previous plans, I was to apply for jobs in the tenth week of my internship, or at least start a conversation in my current

aspect of reduced payment due to the pandemic. Internships barely pay and reducing that certainly makes a difference, however, since it is an academic internship, the experience is more valuable than the remuneration."

Speaking about his learning experience as an intern at a bank, Tahsin Nawaz says, "Although the workload has been reduced significantly over the last weeks, so has the number of customers and the size of the workforce. After all, internships are opportunities to learn skills in a real-life setting. So, handling customers and learning to work collaboratively is a huge part of it. This has not only limited my abilities to learn all the services provided by a bank, but has caused the work environment to change drastically."

Remotely tech-educating teachers has been one of the biggest challenges and though we had already given demonstrations to a few teachers beforehand, due to the nature of the work, many teachers approaching us were not able to successfully transition their classrooms.

"At one point, we noticed that most teachers were comfortable using phone applications, as they are more user-friendly. So then, we had to quickly reallocate our resources to release a mobile phone app variant at the earliest," he adds.

Furthermore, many start-up businesses are incurring major losses due to the unpredictability of future events. Nahian Ibnat Beg, co-owns an event management firm which officially launched last year. About the challenges her firm is having to face, she mentions, "Until the end of February, things were still close to normal. We had received multiple bookings for events and the respective advance fees as well which we had used to buy material and placed orders for resources. Shortly after, we had to return all of the advances, even the ones we had already spent by exhausting our existing reserve. We had also just recently started receiving organic exposure but that has also stopped. Now we have no upcoming work and savings."

Things are drastically changing by the day and people from all fields are having to adjust their activities and work patterns, if they even have the opportunity to be working from home. To help make better sense of current situations, we spoke to Pro-Vice Chancellor (Designate) of Northern University Bangladesh, Prof. Dr. Engr. Md. Humayun Kabir about the current challenges and the prospective impacts.

"The most prominent challenge faced by young people during this situation would be the frustration that would inevitably arise. But, these young minds need to be able to deal with the situation positively and learn how to work unitedly. They must remain goal oriented and patient in order to be able to mitigate the impacts. I believe being optimistic is absolutely essential. New jobs will be created and the young generation will have new scopes for jobs. Hopefully our economy will be revived soon, but they must keep working hard," he says.

The Covid-19 crisis has not only impacted career plans and work opportunities for the settled, but also incomes and livelihoods for young individuals and their families. Changes are taking place at an unprecedented rate and hence it can be tough to make sense of situations and plan accordingly. In a situation that is foreign to everyone, only time will tell how the young professionals can rise beyond such life-altering disruptions.

*Name has been changed for privacy

Syeda Afrin Tarannum would choose 'The Script' over 'G-Eazy' any day. Continue ignoring her taste in music on afrintara@gmail.com



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

workplace about a new, permanent role. Instead it has all gone into a tailspin at the moment."

When asked about the impact it has had on his internship experience, he says, "Since timetables don't always align, the creative process has not been the same as it was when everyone would get together and collaborate. Even though most details have been ironed out by now, it took some time to get there. However, things are a little more structured in an office environment and the implementation of work from home takes up more time and throws off the work-life balance as there are no actual closing times and weekends. There's also

ENTREPRENEURS

Start-ups and businesses require a lot of time to plan and strategise every aspect before they are launched. Each step until and even after the launch is absolutely crucial, but with a crisis that is ambiguous in nature, multiple steps may have to be skipped and losses have to be incurred according to the nature of the situation.

Ekram Mohammad, CEO and Lead Programmer of an e-learning start-up was asked about the experiences they've had in the past few weeks. He responds, "Due to the shutdown, the demand for online platforms had plummeted drastically, so we had to rush and launch our website before it was ready.