

Can the health sector withstand the threat of Covid-19?

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BA NGLADESH is celebrated as a development success in South Asia and has outperformed many of its neighbours on social development indicators. A key driver of this success has been the country's impressive outcomes in health. These hard-earned achievements are now being undermined by Covid-19. Curbing the spread of the virus in these unprecedented times is of utmost importance. However, we should not lose sight of other essential healthcare needs, which if neglected, will place additional strain on the healthcare system.

Despite the recent progress, the pandemic has exposed systemic weaknesses in the health sector such as inadequate financing (less than 1 percent of the country's GDP is allocated to health), shortage of skilled personnel across the health system, poor infrastructure, weak monitoring and governance, and inadequate coordination among key stakeholders. Threats posed by Covid-19 will significantly compound these existing challenges. The health sector will require substantial amount of additional funding to respond to the pandemic, but this additional funding must not come at the expense of other critical health services.

Our analysis of government data suggest that overall government hospital admissions have declined by 63 percent over the last few months. This includes a 73 percent decline in the number of patients with acute heart and cardiovascular diseases and more than a 50 percent reduction in patients with kidney failure. Anecdotal evidence suggests that during this pandemic, many patients were not allowed into hospitals without a negative Covid-19 test certificate even

when they had an emergency. These trends are particularly concerning for maternal and child health. Over the past few months, the number of pregnant women receiving at least one antenatal care visit declined by 46 percent, the number of deliveries by doctors or midwives fell by 14 percent, and hospital deliveries declined by 43 percent.

New projections from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) predict that globally more than 47 million women and girls could lose access to family planning, leading to 7 million unintended pregnancies due to Covid-19. The report highlights that many women are forgoing important medical appointments because of fear of contracting the virus, which sheds some light on the



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Bangladesh has also seen a recent drop in routine immunisations with data showing a 20 percent decline in immunisation sessions, resulting in considerable reductions in essential vaccinations such as the BCG (around 50 percent), measles and rubella, PENTA 1 and PENTA 3.

In addition, global trends show a rise in gender-based violence and mental health issues owing to lockdown measures. The burden of mental health disorders in the country is yet to be fully understood, but the pandemic's mental and psychological implications cannot be ignored. Isolation, loss of loved ones, lack of job and economic security and increased inequality, will all adversely impact mental and physical health.

A recent article by Brac reported that quarantine measures and social isolation for Covid-19 positive patients "is leading to family and friends abandoning their relatives

and fleeing their residences in fear of retribution". The stigma associated with Covid-19 will exacerbate people's health and livelihoods.

In light of these challenges, we propose three immediate measures for the government to consider:

i) The government should allocate additional funding to the health sector in its next budget. It could consider the WHO's recommendation of increasing health spending to 4 percent of GDP. While additional financing is justifiably required for Covid-19, funding should not come at the cost to other essential healthcare needs. The government should continue to prioritise areas such as maternal and child health, communicable and non-communicable diseases, to reduce the overall impact on the health sector. Furthermore, another concern with limited government spending on healthcare is that a very high percentage (66 percent) of the total

health expenditure is currently met by households themselves, pushing them deeper into poverty.

ii) Increase ongoing collaboration and close coordination with key stakeholders within government ministries and departments, the private sector, NGOs, and the international donor community to pool resources and to align efforts. Strong commitment and harmonisation across the sector will be key to attaining SDG 3 and other related SDG targets within the stipulated period.

iii) Renew focus on vulnerable populations and underscore the importance of mental health. Even though the lockdown has been lifted, repercussions of the pandemic and other health concerns could be felt for quite some time. A commitment from the government to prioritise support for vulnerable groups and overall mental and physical wellbeing of its citizens will be an important stepping-stone in the nation's recovery.

While the healthcare system in Bangladesh is justifiably prioritising its response to the pandemic, it would be myopic for the government to put aside other essential healthcare needs at this time. The importance of the health sector is not only in ensuring healthy lives but also the considerable role it plays in the economy in general. Policy decisions around financing and responding to the pandemic need to be reinforced through ongoing commitments to the overall health sector, to avert a broader public health and economic crisis.

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Niloufer Manzur: A visionary and guiding light

FIRDAUSI QADRI

AFTER days of mourning and sadness, I wanted to take the time to recognise the person who for 36 years played a pivotal role in helping me raise my children. Along with her team at Sunbeams, Niloufer Manzur was responsible for helping my children grow and blossom and I will forever be grateful for the impact she had on our lives.

My husband is a teacher, and I come from a family of teachers. As with all parents, as we approached that stage of our lives, we wanted to find the best possible school for our children. Choosing Sunbeams was easily one of the best decisions we have ever made.

I first met Apa when my husband and I brought our oldest child to Sunbeams for the school's orientation programme. This was in 1984, yet I remember her speech like it was yesterday. In her warm but affirmative way she told us not to spoil our children. She did not want anyone to prepare extravagant lunches that other families may not be able to afford, and she explained how our children were to be dressed simply, and that we were not to send birthday cakes or gifts on special days. This was a completely different approach to what I had seen at other institutions. I knew I was in the right place and I could relax knowing that my child was in good hands.

Fast forward two years—I was working full time, with two little sons, and another child on the way. There was so much stigma about working mothers back then. I was constantly worried about the effect my career would have on my ability to raise my three young children. I felt Apa could

understand my challenges of balancing my dedication to my children while at the same time managing a career, and she was always supportive of my efforts. I trusted Apa and her team completely. Every teacher and staff member had been chosen carefully by Niloufer Manzur to take her values forward. I happily went to work each morning, leaving my children in the safe hands of the Sunbeams team with full assurance that under Apa's guidance, they would be very well looked after. She appreciated the trust parents had placed on Sunbeams and was always conscious of this responsibility.

I give Sunbeams, its teachers and its staff significant credit for the manner in which my children grew up, and how they learned not to value materialistic things but to appreciate friendship, kindness and the embrace of all people. At school, *darwan bhai* was as important as *Halima bua* and all the teachers. My children saw the respect their principal gave to everyone around her—drivers, household staff, relatives and elders. As parents, my husband and I would not have been able to embed these values into our children alone without the strong grounding they received at Sunbeams.

Apa could step into anyone's shoes and see things from their perspective. What she has taught the children (and ourselves) are integrity, honesty, kindness, striving for excellence—not with words but by showing these in the way she led her life and by the examples she set. She made the parents comfortable no matter how their children were performing in their studies or what pranks they had been up to at school. It was the soft cautions that she uttered that made it easy for



Niloufer Manzur

parents to help improve their ways and that of their children. I always looked forward to hearing Apa speak at school programmes. I loved her speeches during class commencement ceremonies—she always spoke with her heart in her warm kind voice. Her speeches were always uplifting, and I always wished she would speak some more.

Niloufer Manzur believed in equality and individuality. She saw each child as special, each with unique attributes that could be nurtured to bring out the best in them. She treated everyone equally and had time to appreciate each child separately. I am indebted to her for never making me feel that any of my three children were less deserving of her attention. It was her careful love and trust that made it possible for me to succeed as a mother and for my children to blossom as responsible individuals.

Niloufer Manzur and Sunbeams made it possible for children to benefit

from a well-rounded education—history, literature, science, mathematics, art and music were all part of the curriculum. She created a demanding environment and encouraged children to excel. Apa encouraged students to learn all they could during school hours so that no private tuition would be needed. She made a strong effort to stress this point, and made it possible through the curriculum and the well trained, quality teachers, who were able to have a lasting impact on our children.

Her love for Bangladesh was so deep. She encouraged children to be proud of their history, culture and language. Although Sunbeams is an English medium school, Bangla was given equal precedence. Children learnt

to speak fluently in both English and Bangla languages and celebrate Ekushey February, and Pabela Baishakh as much as they did Eid and other festivities. She aspired for her students to be nation builders, much like herself, though she was far too humble to use herself as an example for others to follow.

I last saw Niloufer Manzur at my daughter's wedding reception two years ago, when she graced the occasion with her presence. Even on that day she made it a point to seek out our family members and friends she had known over the years and to connect with my daughter's friends, all of whom had grown up as part of Apa's Sunbeams family. Since that event, even though we had not spoken for a while, Apa was often in my thoughts and I had often thought of reaching out to her, but hadn't found the time to do so. One of my biggest regrets today is that I hadn't acted on my desire to connect with her and speak with her.

Apa will miss you, your kindness, your love, your values. I will miss not being able to bring my grandchildren to your school to see the twinkle in your eyes and the kind smile and warmth with which you would have received them. The last time I felt this kind of sadness was when my grandmother passed away 30 years ago. Today I am amazed to feel the same sense of loss and grief. What you meant to me Apa, I am sure you meant to countless other parents and I believe I speak for all of us when I say that the loss is irreplaceable. To live a life as you have and to have given so much to others is to have lived it well. You will glow in my heart and in the hearts of others forever.

Dr Firdausi Qadri, is senior scientist at icddr, b and Lead, IDESHI.

QUOTABLE Quote

JULIAN BAGGINI
(Born 1968)
British writer and philosopher.

It's not leftovers that are wasteful, but those who either don't know what to do with them or can't be bothered.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Small grove
- 6 Sentry's duty
- 11 Shrimp's kin
- 12 Sun Valley's state
- 13 Bitter
- 14 Sunpowered
- 15 Despicable
- 17 Relatives
- 18 Convention IDs
- 22 Track shape
- 23 Ice-cream treat
- 27 Bashful
- 29 Give over
- 30 Made flat
- 32 Bud holder
- 33 Got closer to overtaking
- 35 Fuming
- 38 Genuine

DOWN

- 1 Tax pro: Abbr.
- 2 "The Lord of the Rings"
- 3 Golf goal
- 4 Turning
- 5 Terminate a romance
- 6 Sardonic sort
- 7 Hoopla
- 8 Radio format
- 9 Spiced tea
- 10 Rhino feature
- 16 – Vegas
- 18 Staff symbol
- 19 Tel –
- 20 Jerry Herman musical
- 21 Cowardly
- 24 Out of play
- 25 Too
- 26 Unspoiled spot
- 28 Letter start
- 31 Game cube
- 34 Gymnast
- Comaneci
- 35 Doll cry
- 36 Heady drinks
- 37 Grime
- 40 Highest card
- 42 Spoil
- 43 Ram's mate
- 44 Notice

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

R	A	F	T	S	S	T	E	A	M
E	M	A	I	L	A	R	U	B	A
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT