

SPECIAL FEATURE

# Faithful to the Oath

While so many of us are at home to ‘flatten the curve,’ or in other words, to reduce the spread of COVID-19, our healthcare professionals are fighting long, gruelling hours on the front lines. Have you ever wondered what a typical day for a doctor at a hospital is like during this pandemic? Have you wondered what kind of life they are living right now, or what profound challenges and struggles they are facing in the battlefield?

We have interviewed two physicians who have been fighting on the front lines since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh.

Dr Shapur Ikhtaire

Physician & Internal Medicine Specialist,  
Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical  
University (BSMMU)

On June 24, Dr Shapur Ikhtaire visited his in-laws to meet his wife and only son, who was soon to turn three. He had not seen them in more than six weeks. Physicians like Dr Ikhtaire, who are fighting on the front lines, self-isolate themselves to avoid the possibility of infecting their families with the coronavirus. So, while Dr Ikhtaire lives in his own apartment, his wife and son now live with his in-laws. Our doctors are not only dealing with unprecedented workplace stress, but also anxiety and loneliness of exceptional intensity, which are all taking a toll on their psyche.

“Most of the doctors and healthcare providers are now having to stay away from their families, which naturally causes anxiety and loneliness in them,” said Dr Ikhtaire.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr Ikhtaire’s life changed overnight in more than one way.

“At BSMMU, our academic sessions, extensive ward rounds, and clinical discussions have now mostly turned into tackling emergencies, short rounds focusing on only patient care, and virtual telemedicine,” he said.

In this pandemic-ridden world, we see images of doctors in protective gear every day and everywhere, but how much do we know about the struggles behind working in PPE, especially in Bangladesh’s tropical climate?

“Working in PPE can be very distressing and extremely uncomfortable in a setting without a central air-cooling system, especially in our hot and humid climate,” said Dr Ikhtaire. “Sometimes, we get exhausted, anxious, and even frustrated.”

Combating a highly contagious disease has brought upon our healthcare providers other unique challenges, too. One of them is the inability of the doctors and patients to see each other. Dr Ikhtaire thinks that this is causing a psychological gap and dissatisfaction between doctors and their patients, especially those who are suffering from COVID-19.

“Unlike others, COVID-19 patients are socially isolated, and are not usually looked after by their own family members, which brings on them enormous anxiety, fear, and despair that is often left unnoticed by the



society,” he said.

But it is their unwavering dedication, along with the love and support of their family members that keep our front-line heroes going. Although not often discussed, the families of front-line caregivers are shouldering an unprecedented burden of emotional stress and fear.

“My wife and in-laws are taking care of my son. My parents are keeping me in their prayers, and are always reminding me of my duty toward my profession,” said Dr Ikhtaire. “My family continues to boost my mental strength and courage.”

Asked if there is one good thing that he has seen in these struggling and unpredictable times, he said, “One good thing I have noticed in these difficult times is the self-actualisation of being human. Many people have realised that a selfless life is the only life that is worth living.” He added, “If we have to live in this world, we have to live collectively.”

Dr Fardous Rahman Mili  
Medical Officer, Skin & VD,  
Central Police Hospital, Dhaka

At the end of a long day at work, Dr Mili longs to be in her own home, and lay her tired self in her own bed. She aches for her

two children, and wants to hug them tight. But doctors like Fardous Rahman Mili do not return home after a harrowing day at the hospital. Instead, they quarantine away from their immediate families at designated city hotels.

“Every single day, we set out to perform our medical duty not knowing whether we will come back safe and healthy,” said Dr Mili. “There was a time when life without family seemed impossible. But now, for the sake of our COVID-19 patients, we sacrifice our family life every minute. We do not even know when we can see our loved ones again.”

Asked how treating COVID-19 patients is uniquely different, Dr Mili said, “It is very different, because we are fighting against a novel and a highly contagious coronavirus.”

“We continuously work under tremendous amounts of stress. At work, we also have to wear PPE (personal protective equipment), which is cumbersome. If you have never worn one, you do not know what it is like to breathe and work in PPE,” she said.

In their 12-hour shift, Dr Mili and her colleagues eat only once and pay only one trip to the washroom, chiefly because donning and doffing PPE is a time-consuming procedure.

At the time of writing this piece, COVID-19 has claimed 60 doctors in Bangladesh. Although this is alarming, Dr Mili says that she is faithful to the Hippocratic Oath she swore. Her husband, also a doctor, and her parents are all proud of her and her loyalty to her noble profession.

Dr Mili’s parents look after her two young children, who, needless to mention, miss being with their mother. “It is distressing for small children to be away from their parents for such a long time, especially during these uncertain times,” said Dr Mili.

“The family members of the healthcare service providers are the real fighters. They are the engines of the front-liners, who have dedicated their lives to saving their patients,” she added.

But there are a few things that deeply trouble Dr Mili. One of them is some people’s lack of empathy and respect for the front-line heroes.

“Some landlords even ask healthcare professionals treating COVID-19 patients to vacate their rented homes for the fear that they could spread the disease,” she said, her voice trembling.

Physicians like Fardous Rahman Mili and Shapur Ikhtaire march into hospitals every day while we are advised to stay home and stay safe. It is during times of struggle and unpredictability that we realise who our real heroes are. In this ruinous pandemic, it is the healthcare professionals who have stood tall and brave. To say thank you to these front-line heroes of the coronavirus fight is an understatement.

By Wara Karim

Photo: LS Archive/ Sazzad Ibne Sayed