

“We have essentially been running two separate healthcare setups in our hospital since the emergence of COVID-19”

IN CONVERSATION WITH MOHAMMAD FAIZUR RAHMAN

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Considering the COVID-19 crisis, how would you analyse the current situation of people who are suffering from cardiovascular diseases (CVD) in Bangladesh?

Currently, people with deteriorating symptoms of CVD are often delaying going to the hospital out of fear of contracting COVID-19, thereby worsening their situation. We need to mitigate this fear of hospital visits and consultations. Additionally, I would request everyone to refer to experts while taking healthcare decisions instead of believing information from unreliable sources.

At this stage, it is difficult to comment on whether there is any direct impact of COVID-19 on CVD patients. However, what COVID-19 does is accelerate the health deterioration of CVD patients. As we know, COVID-19 damages the lungs severely, so when it comes to COVID-19 positive CVD patients, there is a chance of an additional complication arising during cardiac surgery and other cardiovascular treatment procedures. This is why we try to treat COVID-19 before moving forward with definitive treatment of underlying cardiovascular problems.

Many people are staying home for months on end. These people need to stay active, eat nutritionally balanced food at regular intervals, and take care of their mental health. People will have no control over hypertension, diabetes, obesity and other cardiac issues if they do not lead a disciplined life. If all of these are maintained, not only the heart, but the entire body will stay healthy. The most important part is still, of course, maintaining social distancing and proper handwash hygiene and wearing masks.

What types of challenges are you facing regarding cardiac patients and their management during this time?

Patients of heart failure quite often exhibit symptoms similar to COVID-19 patients, such as difficulty in breathing. This leaves cardiovascular patients confused about whether they have COVID-19 or not. This is why we always prioritise screening all patients for COVID-19 first.

If a CVD patient is found to be COVID-19 negative, we follow the usual cardiovascular treatment protocol. However, if a patient is found to be COVID-19 positive, physicians deliberate on which treatment procedure would be best for them and whether medical



management is required or not, depending on individual patients' situations. Since a lot of analysis is needed to come to clinical decisions, management of COVID-19 positive CVD patients can be difficult.

What facilities has United Hospital introduced to tackle this pandemic?

We have designed a new protocol for the entire hospital. Our patients are all screened regularly to check whether they have COVID-19. Any patient who enters the emergency unit must first go through various clinical assessments.

We have essentially been running two separate healthcare setups under the same roof of our hospital since the emergence of COVID-19. There are two floors dedicated to the management of COVID-19 patients. We prepared custom-made infrastructure for these patients with extra facilities such

as ICUs with ventilators and high flow nasal cannula, central oxygen line support, dedicated dialysis facilities and coronary care. We have opened a new dedicated ICU for COVID-19 patients and earmarked separate beds for CCU and for dialysis. Our Cath labs and Operation Theatres (OTs) are also marked separately for COVID-19 patients, in case they need those facilities. We are also trying to provide separate consultant care for COVID and non-COVID patients, so, young consultants are receiving more work opportunities here now. We provide separate healthcare staff, including doctors, nurses, patient care attendants, housekeeping staff for COVID and non-COVID areas.

How are you ensuring awareness, hygiene and other safety measures?

We have many senior consultants who are involved with international forums.

They receive and share constant updates from around the world. Furthermore, we have held many workshops, symposia and conferences regarding COVID-19 treatment and awareness. We have engaged with the government, UN agencies like WHO and UNDP to raise awareness among our staff.

We have especially focused on awareness-building. Communicating COVID-19 prevention measures to the patients and staff is crucial and therefore, we are facilitating these conversations very actively. Our doctors are involved in regular Zoom sessions where we provide advice to CVD patients about lifestyle changes, nutrition, etc. Flyers, emails, and SMS are also used for knowledge dissemination.

As a protocol, all staff are tested for COVID-19 whenever appropriate. Safety measures for the health workers treating COVID-19 patients are in place and we are

ensuring they all have right PPEs for right occasions. Health workers are often infected when they take off PPE, which is why we constantly raise awareness on the relevant guidelines for PPE donning and doffing.

We have a home care package for COVID-19 patients where we include all the essentials such as disposable plates, glasses, spoons, gloves, masks, sanitisers, surface cleaners, medicines, notepads, pulse oximeters, and thermometers. For each of the 14 days of isolation, our doctors, dieticians, rehab specialists, and counsellors provide the patient with video consultations. We also have a two-week post-COVID rehab programme where COVID patients are given treatment advice and rehab exercise with relevant investigations to regain a normal functional life.

What are your long-term plans for United Hospital in the post-COVID era?

In terms of patient management, we have adapted very fast in this crisis and we feel confident as we are already managing two parallel healthcare setups in our hospital.

Unfortunately, there is no COVID vaccine in sight. Our plans depend a lot on when the vaccine will arrive. The United Group is committed to people's healthcare, both through our commercial ventures and through United Trust, which works heavily in healthcare. We have extensive plans for network expansion with a commitment to set up 1,700 beds with existing 500 beds of United Hospital, upcoming 500 beds each in United Medical College Hospital in Satarkool area of the capital and United Chattogram Hospital under PPP with Ministry of Railway, and the 200-bed state-of-the-art MA Rashid Hospital in Jamalpur to be launched in January. With the arrival of COVID-19 vaccine, our network expansion strategy will be aligned accordingly.

Many patients from Bangladesh usually go abroad for treatment but they are unable to do so now due to this pandemic. This is an opportunity for us to create confidence among these patients that we are equally able to provide them with same quality treatment that they obtain overseas. This current situation is also an eye-opener for the healthcare industry since all infrastructures and facilities need to fill up existing gaps as per the demands of the pandemic.

Do you have any recommendations for the government during this transitional period?

We have probably around 90,000 doctors in the country. However, I believe, to ensure proper healthcare for the entire country, we need much more than that. We have approximately 70,000 nurses, but again, we require an amount which is a multiple of what we have now. Therefore, only developing hospitals is not enough; developing trained and skilled healthcare staff is crucial as well. The private sector has a significant role to play here. They must actively find opportunities to present their ideas to the government and gain permission to build centres. The government can also help them with policy support to establish hospitals and other relevant centres, especially because investment in new healthcare centres leads to significant employment generation.

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WEBINAR



The Daily Star

The diabetes-heart connection and the potential threat of COVID-19

Every year, around 1,71,00,000 people die of cardiovascular disease worldwide. To raise awareness regarding cardiovascular health, every year, the World Heart Federation celebrates World Heart Day.

The theme of World Heart Day this year is “Use heart to beat cardiovascular disease (CVD)” and in celebration of this occasion, Beacon Pharmaceuticals Limited and The Daily Star jointly organised a webinar titled “The diabetes-heart connection and the potential threat of COVID-19” on September 25, 2020.

The webinar focused on significant issues concerning the correlation and causation between COVID-19 and other underlying cardiovascular conditions. It also discussed the risk factors presented by COVID-19 for patients with diabetes and hypertension and ways to minimise them. At the beginning of the pandemic, it was suspected that the SARS-CoV-2 infects the lung cells and affects the respiratory system. However, new data has now revealed its impact on the cardiovascular system and other major organs of the body.

Professor Dr S M Ashrafuzzaman, Head of the Endocrinologist Department of Endocrinology & Diabetes at BIRDEM shared, “People with diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease (CVD), asthma etc., are at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19.” Furthermore, he discussed that elderly people with such underlying conditions have a much more difficult recovery path ahead of them besides the risk of having higher mortality rates.



Dr. A.K.M Monwarul Islam

He elaborated on what really ties these underlying conditions together, saying, “Currently, 425 million people are living with diabetes and, around 50 to 60 percent people with diabetes develop CVD. Also, since a person with diabetes is immunocompromised, they are much more likely to develop CVD.”

Professor Mir Jamal Uddin, Director of NICVD, added, “The mortality rate for diabetes patients with COVID-19 is four to eight times higher than that of a healthy individual.”

According to Dr AKM Monwarul Islam, Associate Professor of Cardiology at NICVD, “Hypertension is also just as common as heart disease and diabetes, if not more. 30 percent of adults in Bangladesh and 113 crore people worldwide have hypertension and since this condition causes internal damage within patients without showing any significant outwardly symptoms, by the



Professor AKM Fazlur Rahman

time people realise they have hypertension, it is already too late.” Therefore, he went on to refer to hypertension as a silent killer.

Professor Jamal shared a more in-depth view on how COVID-19 affects the heart. His observations show that COVID-19 can cause myocarditis which is an inflammation of the heart muscle. Myocarditis also leads to irregular heartbeats, which is a medical condition known as arrhythmia. All these conditions can eventually culminate into a heart attack in the absence of proper treatment.

He added, “We carried out a joint study with icddr,b which revealed that ten percent of the patients being admitted for heart attacks were found to be COVID-19 positive upon testing.”

Professor Jamal agreed on how this can be concerning for the doctors as they generally treat these patients without prior knowledge. But, at NICVD, the risk



Professor Dr S M Ashrafuzzaman

is minimised by sending any suspected patients to their isolation ward which currently has 48 beds. After proper treatment of the underlying condition, these COVID-19 positive patients are sent to hospitals dedicated to their treatment.

Minimisation of the risk factors was a key point discussed by all the speakers who reiterated the importance of prevention. “Prevention of CVD depends on the management of the associated risk factors. The risk factors include hypertension, diabetes, obesity, high cholesterol level, etc,” said Professor Dr AKM Fazlur Rahman of the Department of Cardiology at BSMMU.

He advised that people living sedentary lives should be more active and should exercise daily as well as maintain a healthy diet consisting of heart-healthy foods. He further related the devastating effect of smoking on heart health. “A



Professor Mir Jamal Uddin

person who quits smoking will have a lower risk of heart disease within a year. In 15 years, the risk will lower to that of a non-smoker.”

Dr Ashrafuzzaman suggested keeping factors such as Body Mass Index (BMI) and cholesterol levels in check and reiterated the importance of early detection since it makes prevention easier.

For patients with special conditions, such as heart valve patients, Dr Monwarul emphasised on the importance of regular check-ups. “Due to COVID-19, many people are now scared to visit hospitals. However, these patients still need to keep the dosage of their medications in check.”

The discussion came to an end with insights into the current state of the pharmaceutical industry in our country.

“Our country has many pharmaceutical companies of international standards,” acknowledged professor Fazlur Rahman.