

FOCUS

Doctors and Patients in Urban Bangladesh A FRACTURED ALLIANCE

by Dr Omar Rahman, MD, DSc

As a physician I am frequently asked to give advice on various people's medical problems, and/or comment on some interaction with other doctors. Despite a strong sense of loyalty and faith in my chosen profession, and a healthy dose of skepticism about anecdotal reports, I have to concede that the picture one gets of medical care in urban Bangladesh is increasingly grim.

Many people (including a growing minority of doctors) complain of callous physicians who are so engrossed in monetary gain that they barely have the time to fully examine patients, leave alone reassurance. Waiting times are long, time spent with the physician is incredibly short, doctors rarely explain in a coherent fashion what the patient's problems are, the fees are exorbitant, and to top it all, the quality of medical advice is in many cases very questionable. Horror stories abound of arrogant, often incompetent physicians, wrong diagnoses, non-existent medical records, faulty laboratory equipment, etc. It is no wonder that anyone who has the means is increasingly going abroad to India, Bangkok or Singapore to seek reliable medical attention.

The roots of this problem are multifaceted. At the most basic level, in Bangladesh, as in other developing countries, there are many more patients than doctors — i.e., demand for health care services vastly outstrips the supply of health care providers. Moreover, most middle class patients want to go only to those doctors who have post-graduate qualifications (preferably foreign). Access to such prized qualifications is jealously guarded and controlled by those already possessing such qualifications. This then leads to a "seller's market," whereby

a small group of doctors with the "appropriate" qualifications can raise prices and lower quality with impunity — for there is practically no where else for patients to go.

While increasing the production of MBBS physicians is the obvious answer to their under supply, whether this should be done by the government using scarce public resources to subsidize medical education, or through the private sector, is debatable. It is not clear that a developing country like Bangladesh should subsidize higher medical education to produce MBBS physicians who have historically not shown any tendency to re-locate to non-urban areas where the majority of the population resides.

the representation of examiners who are not fearful of the junior doctors as potential competitors. This can come about in several ways: One is to increase the number of non-Bangladeshi examiners, and another is to select examiners from a pool of physicians who are not engaged in private practice.

A related issue with regard to post-graduate qualifications is the assumption on the part of most patients that, those with such qualifications are competent and those without are not. While credentials have a certain correlation with quality the relationship is actually not as reliable as patients think. Of course this mystique about post-graduate qualifications is

damental level determined by the outcome of the interaction — did the car get fixed, did the patient recover?

Unfortunately for both patients and physicians, medicine is an inexact science with not completely predictable therapeutic results. One can have a good doctor and have a bad outcome, and on the other hand have a bad doctor and by chance have a good outcome. Unless patients are educated about the limitations of medical practice, and the somewhat unpredictable nature of disease outcomes, they will hold doctors to an unrealistic standard. I think both doctors and patients would be better served with more complete information ex-

posed for those physicians employed in government medical colleges, licencing of clinics/laboratories to ensure quality, etc. Laudable as these aims are, the historical evidence both from the developing and the developed world suggests that such regulations are hard to enforce, and inevitably lead to yet another layer of bureaucracy in an already overly bureaucratized society.

A much more viable alternative to onerous, hard to enforce, government regulations is, to rely on what are referred to as private sector or "market" solutions. Medical services need to be viewed as other kinds of professional services such as legal or accounting services,

In order to bring about greater accountability and quality to the medical profession in Bangladesh, we need to (a) have some neutral consumer group to provide potential patients with a rating system for physicians — a kind of seal of approval and (b) make it easier for patients to file and win malpractice suits in cases of gross negligence on the part of the doctor.

Some would argue that if there is a demand for MBBS physicians, the private sector will step in and cater to that demand, just as the market caters to demands for other services.

With regard to access to post-graduate qualifications, the reality is that a disproportionately small number of MBBS physicians end up with such qualifications. This suggests two possibilities: (i) poor quality on the part of the junior doctors or (ii) a pattern of intentional failing of candidates by the examiners. If the former is true, we need to take a serious look at the medical college education system. In the latter case, one way to improve the situation would be to increase

actively and assiduously promoted by those having such credentials.

The issue about credentials reflects a more basic problem of criteria for deciding quality. While my physician colleagues may take umbrage at being compared to car-mechanics, choosing a good doctor is not that different from choosing a good car mechanic — in fact in Bangladesh, finding the latter may be much more difficult.

In both cases clients have a problem about which they know very little, and have to rely on the competence and technical knowledge of the service provider which they have insufficient information to evaluate. The quality of the service provider is at a fun-

change where doctors are candid about uncertainties in the diagnosis and in the results of therapy, even at the risk of tarnishing the image of the all knowing all solving physician.

While in the long run increasing the supply of appropriately qualified physicians, and educating patients about the limitations of medical practice will certainly help, in the near future there will still remain a significant problem vis-a-vis overpriced, poor quality medical services. This increasingly intolerable medical care situation has led to calls at various times for different types of regulations such as, a cap on doctor's fees, a ban/restriction on private practice opportunities

with the proviso that errors on the part of the provider have much more severe consequences. In order to bring about greater accountability and quality to the medical profession in Bangladesh, we need to (a) have some neutral consumer group to provide potential patients with a rating system for physicians — a kind of seal of approval and (b) make it easier for patients to file and win malpractice suits in cases of gross negligence on the part of the doctor.

With regard to a physician rating system, while it is not a straightforward exercise, a reasonable solution is certainly possible and some other countries are making tentative steps in that direc-

tion. Potential candidates for aspects to be considered in such a rating system are: (a) physician qualifications and training; (b) average amount of time actually spent by the physician examining and advising the patient — a particularly important quality indicator; (c) time required to get an appointment; (d) average waiting time in the waiting room; (e) doctor's fees; (f) some assessment of the physical environment of the doctors' chambers — most Bangladeshi physicians have very elementary notions of hygiene; (g) the presence of patient records — currently physicians in Bangladesh do not feel the need for any kind of permanent documentation; and (h) some evaluation of the information content of the doctor's advice — most patients complain of not receiving adequate, coherent instructions about therapy.

Concerning malpractice, at the risk of being considered a renegade by my professional colleagues, I think it is fair to say that while the US suffers from too many malpractice suits, resulting in often unnecessary medical expenditures, Bangladesh suffers from too few. The medical profession in this country currently has very little incentive to reform on its own, thus patients must resort to the legal system to enforce accountability. Even a few successful malpractice suits will have a significant effect on improving physician behavior.

In the end, the only way to reform the Bangladeshi medical care system is to provide patients with a wide array of informed choices, with a backup of easy access to legal redress.

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CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS In Search of a Way Out 'A Neutral Caretaker Govt Can be Formed under Constitutional Framework'

An Interview with Justice K M Subhan,
by Chapal Bashar



About holding by-elections to all the seats likely to be declared vacant due to 90 days' absence of the MPs, he maintained that this will entail unnecessary huge expenditure for a short period as the general elections have to be completed soon. "Such unnecessary expenditure and by-elections to the vacant seats, other than those 11 or a few more, can be avoided through understanding between the ruling party and the Opposition."

Supporting the concept of caretaker government for ensuring free and fair polls, Justice Subhan said, "Even in other countries of the sub-continent, there are examples of holding elections under caretaker administrations and in Pakistan, provision of caretaker government has been incorporated in the country's constitution."

As regards present political and constitutional crisis, he observed that it could not be solved because of deep differences in the attitude of the ruling party and the main opposition party.

These two parties looked upon each other as political enemies, which is unfortunate," he said adding, "in a parliamentary system, the ruling party constantly consults the Opposition which is alternative government, over national issues, but in Bangladesh, such practice is not existing."

Justice Subhan served the judiciary as a judge of the High Court and Appellate Division for over 11 years, — from March 1971 to June 1982.

Elaborating his contention about the possible way for ending the political deadlock, he suggested that both the government and the Opposition should come to a consensus and take benefit of the by-elections.

Eleven or more persons acceptable to both the sides can be nominated and elected members of parliament who will be called upon by the President to form the government under Article 56 (4) of the constitution," he said pointing out that this can be done only if the present Prime Minister agrees to resign.

Justice Subhan said that the leader of those 11 or more persons can be invited to form a government since he will enjoy support of the House. "Soon after formation of such government, the Parliament should be dissolved and the elections for the sixth Parliament will be arranged."

Justice Subhan also held the Election Commission responsible for the way it handled the Mirpur and Magura by-elections, which, according to him, deteriorated the political situation.

"The constitutional crisis can be solved peacefully by accepting the demand of a caretaker government," said Justice Subhan recommending dissolution of the present Parliament at the earliest, since the "credibility of this Parliament has disappeared."

He suggested that the present Cabinet should resign at least 90 days before the election, because continuation of the present government after the announcement of election date would generate mistrust in the election procedure.

"The crisis can be solved if the parties to the crisis can come to an understanding to resolve it," Justice Subhan concluded.

Stop Press: Where are the Women?

by Lamis Hossain

THE stereotype of a newspaper reporter is often male: an intrepid young man equipped with only a pen and a notebook, dashing off to assignments on a moment's notice and unearthing news with the flair of a drug-sniffing Alsatian.

Unfortunately for women, the perception is grounded in reality. Although the media may not be the playground of the brave and the macho, it is still the preserve of men.

The Kate Adies (BBC) and Kristian Anjanpours (CNN), reporting live from war zones, give us the impression that women have indeed broken through the barriers. But UNESCO (UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) statistics indicate otherwise.

Where are the Women?

Studies conducted in 1993-94 in selected countries of Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America reveal that women have yet to secure even 50 per cent of the jobs in media (radio, TV, Press). The highest figure for European women in the print media is 37.1 per cent in Luxembourg and the lowest is three per cent in Germany. Of the three Asian countries studied, women constitute 7.9 per cent of the print media in India, 6.8 per cent in Japan and 25.5 per cent in Malaysia.

In addition to the low figures, the surveys also disclose that most women have yet to infiltrate the "creative" departments of the press. Many are working in administrative jobs, and almost none are found in technical areas. As for leadership positions, there are no women bureau chiefs in Africa, Japan or Malaysia. India has only one.

The picture for the press in Bangladesh is similar to the rest of the world. There are no detailed studies on women and the media, but the USIS press section took an important first step last month (July) by inviting women journalists to discuss their changing roles in the press. By calling up Dhaka based newspapers and news agencies, the USIS discovered that there are 86 women currently working with the print media. Forty of them turned up for the discussion programme.

The number of women journalists may be a pleasant surprise to those who expected to find only a handful, but it is still woefully low. Although the Press Information Department could not give a total figure for journalists working in Dhaka, the number of those who are Press Club members could be used as a yardstick for comparison. Of the forty women who were at the USIS, only eight were members of the Press Club, and six were waiting for member-

ship. Even in the unlikely event that the forty six women who did not attend the programme were all members of the Press Club, the number of women members would not make up more than eight per cent of the total 500.

The profile of women journalists in Dhaka corresponds in many ways to the UNESCO findings. Only five out of the 40 women at the USIS discussion said that they spend most of their time outside the office. Only six are actually designated as staff reporters and ten as feature writers. The majority of the women in journalism work as sub-editors.

It is clear that reporting remains a male monopoly, but it is unclear whether this is due to recruitment practices or the women's choice. On the one hand, it seems that a reporter's remunera-

representative Elmi Watanabe said that, "Information is power and women should have access to that source of power... it (Bangladesh mass media) should play pro-active role in the empowerment of women because they have the power to mould public opinion."

Participants at the USIS discussion felt that given the constraints of our society, women were better equipped to cover certain issues. Women are more open with women journalists when discussing topics such as family planning. The majority of the participants believed that women approached topics differently than men and could bring in fresh angles.

Some journalists thought that certain NGOs and women's groups were more accessible for them than their male counterparts. Rasheda Amin, senior sub-ed-

women journalists results in greater coverage of so-called 'women's issues'. Just as electing women politicians does not guarantee a boost to women's rights, one should be wary of exaggerating the role of women journalists.

It may even be detrimental for women journalists to be typecast as a "women's issues" reporter. At a Media Workshop on Reproductive Health, held in Bangalore last month (June), a long-time woman reporter of the Times of India, recalled that she was warned by co-workers not to acquire the image of a "soft/woman's issues" reporter. It would keep 'hard news' assignments away from her, she was told.

At the Bangalore workshop, women's activist Vimala Ramachandran pointed out that there should be no such category as 'women's issues'. "From elec-

problem.

In light of the upcoming Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, economist Gita Sen said that women journalists should show the world that issues raised at these conferences relate to real concerns in every women's lives. They are not just Northern concepts.

The USIS discussion in Dhaka also resulted in useful suggestions on the way forward for women journalists. Firstly, women working in the media felt the need for some kind of formal training. All forty women at the USIS were university graduates but only a few had studied Journalism or Communications. Even the latter said that a Communications degree did not give them much practical knowledge. Many got their jobs without any prior writing experience.



tion is not attractive enough for women to compromise their safety after night shifts or to dash off to assignments in less than perfect public transport. On the other hand, by keeping these realities in mind, editors may be unnecessarily protecting candidates who are willing to take the risks.

Women's Role in the Media

Should the statistics for women in the press be a cause for concern? Are there any special advantages in increasing the presence of women in journalism?

One answer is 'yes'. At a workshop organised by the Ministry of Women's Affairs, on the "Role of the Media in Empowering Women", UNDP

of Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) added that, for some reason or another, it seemed easier for women to obtain exclusive interviews from government ministers and officials!

Women can also influence the type of stories covered by a newspaper through the sheer power of numbers. A story meeting in which a substantial segment of those present are female, is more likely to produce different ideas. Women may also feel more comfortable to raise new issues if they are encouraged the support of their female colleagues.

It is debatable, however, to what extent women approach their assignments differently than men, and to what extent an increase in

tricity to sanitation — all issues are women's issues," she said, "and women's issues are men's issues."

The Way Forward

Given these arguments, how can women journalists make their presence felt? Vimala suggested that women become specialists in certain fields. Shyamala Nataraj, former journalist and now director of South India AIDS action committee, observed that women should make a more concerted effort in following a specific subject rather than writing ad hoc articles on diverse issues. Women journalists can thus put their weight behind a particular campaign until policy makers are forced to acknowledge and act on the

Acid Rain Threatens Europe's Protected Areas

by Sarah Russell

NEW WWF research reveals that despite international efforts to reduce air pollution, acid rain continues to damage more than half of Europe's prime nature conservation areas, endangering some of the region's rarest animals and plants.

WWF estimates that species from almost all Europe's major plant and animal groups are affected, with 30 of the region's endemic species, and 26 species of international importance being threatened. Potential victims include the European otter, natterjack toad, and wild salmon, along with the oblong-leaved sundew and numerous rare mosses.

The new report, Acid Rain and Nature Conservation in Europe, released June 29, contains the most detailed breakdown of sites at risk from acid rain ever attempted. Its findings are bleak, particularly for protected areas such as the heathlands of Kalmthout in Belgium, Denmark's Hanstholm coastal reserve, Germany's Berchtesgaden Alps Biosphere Reserve, the virgin forests of Sjaunja in Sweden, and Scotland's Cairngorm Mountains.

Many people seem to think that acid rain is yesterday's problem and that the big issue of the day is climate change," comments Dr Merylyn McKenzie-Hedger, Policy Officer at WWF-World Wide Fund For Nature. "This is wrong for two reasons. First, we are a long way off eliminating acid rain. Second, acid rain is closely linked to climate change; both are caused by burning fossil fuels."

She adds: "It is also increasingly clear that acid rain

is part of a broader air pollution problem which damages human health."

Acid rain is a general term used to describe a range of pollution effects. Several air pollutants, particularly sulphur and nitrogen oxides (both of which are given off when fossil fuels are burnt in power stations, industrial boilers, and motor vehicles) can cause acidification of the environment.

Acidification occurs in two ways. Either the pollutants convert chemically in the atmosphere, turning into acids which are then deposited as rain, mist, or snow. Alternatively, they fall to earth as dry gases and are converted to acids by rainwater.

Until recently, research focused on forests and freshwater in areas with few basic materials to counteract acidity — so-called base-poor areas. Scientists noted that acidification of water in base-poor areas was killing fish (salmon are especially susceptible) and other aquatic life such as frogs, toads, and lichens, and harming the water birds and mammals that feed on them.

By the mid-1980s, 14,000 of Sweden's lakes were believed to be significantly acidified. Researchers also observed that acidification of soils was damaging trees and other plants, with worrying implications for the functioning of entire forest ecosystems. In 1985, observers

recorded that half of West Germany's woodlands were displaying tree damage. WWF's research reveals that air pollution is affecting a far wider range of habitats and species. Ecosystems containing a lot of lower plants, such as lichens, are especially sensitive, because these plants are often directly exposed to acid deposition without being buffered (or protected) by soils. Arctic and alpine heaths and some bogs are therefore likely to be affected.

Efforts to conserve rare animals and plants in protected areas are being thwarted. This is partly because air pollution obscures no boundaries and has extremely far-reaching effects, and partly because many of the areas that are being protected are particularly vulnerable to acid rain. Most of Europe's most pristine areas have survived because they are unsuitable for cultivation and other agricultural purposes. In northern Europe, that unsuitability is often due to the fact that they are "base poor" and thus especially susceptible to acidification.

Acid rain first hit the environmental headlines in the 1970s. Since then, European governments have signed on to the 1983 UN Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution (CLRTAP). Over the past 12 years, one protocol covering nitrogen oxides emissions and two covering sulphur emissions

have been added to the treaty. WWF is concerned, however, that even if countries manage to achieve the reductions laid out in these protocols, many of Europe's most sensitive — and important — natural areas will still be at risk.

Current reduction plans do not, for example, go far enough to safeguard fragile areas in central and northern European countries. The dangers are most extreme in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK — largely due to high emission levels, sensitive soils, and prevailing weather patterns.

In the Baltic states, the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, however, the planned reductions could reduce risks to near zero in most cases. The most secure areas are found in the Mediterranean region and the Balkans, where soils are better able to resist acidification and where emissions are still relatively low.

Acid rain, like climate change, is a global problem, whose effects are felt in different ways in different places. WWF is therefore working on both issues, studying their impacts on a whole range of ecosystems, and trying to come up with solutions to the interlinked problems.

"The best way to combat both acid rain and climate change is to use less energy!" concludes McKenzie-Hedger. "WWF is therefore working on a variety of projects around the world to conserve energy and increase energy efficiency." — WWF

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