

Neurosurgery in South Asia

Bridging the gap

RASHIDA AHMAD

WHEN there's public discussion about health service in this country whether it involves government or non-government organisations, policy-makers or donor agencies nine times out of ten the focus is on the most basic primary health care. For over fifty years we've been battling against high infant and maternal mortality, malnutrition and of course diarrhoeal diseases. Through we have lately been making definite progress in these areas, primary health care remains the priority in the field of medicine in Bangladesh.

In such a context, it might surprise some of us to learn that Dhaka was chosen as the venue for the Second South Asian Neurosurgical Congress (22nd-25th February). Though this was a South Asian conference, foreign delegates included not only the renowned and pioneering neurosurgeons of the region, but also surgeons of international repute from Europe, Southeast Asia and Japan. It may seem somewhat incongruous that such an event should take place in a country where neurosurgery is still relatively new. Should such prominence be given to a relatively high-tech specialisation when many of the deaths and diseases in the region could be prevented with low-tech solutions?

Professor Rashiduddin Ahmad, Head of Neurosurgery at BSMMU Hospital, Dhaka, and this year's congress president, says, "South Asia contains one quarter of the world's population. Throughout the world and this region is no exception, the major cause of mortality in young persons below 40 is accident of which road traffic accidents (RTA) are the most common. Head and spine injuries are the worst outcome of such accidents, and in fact in this region RTA statistics are worse than in developed countries. Police figures show 9-10 people die each day, and this is almost certainly an underreported figure." Ahmad goes on to add that after the age of 50, the second most common cause of death associated with a single organ is stroke or cerebrovascular disease.

Thirty years ago there was no neurosurgery in Bangladesh and the pioneers of the region only began their work in Pakistan and India fifty years ago. And yet given the relatively short span of time and the challenges of environment, there has been remarkable development in this field. According to B. Ramamurthy, Professor of Neurosurgery at Chennai Voluntary Health Services, India, and the senior-most neurosurgeon of the region, "High levels of success have been achieved by South Asian neurosurgeons in this difficult speciality, in spite of the many difficulties faced by them." While those that can afford to still seek treatment outside the region, there is affordable neurosurgical treatment of a high

standard available in South Asia. Every type of neurosurgical procedure is undertaken in the region today: life saving operations for head and spine injuries, brain tumours and strokes; treatment for infections of the brain and spine such as tuberculosis; management of other brain and spine disorders that can cause severe neurological damage paralysis or disability.

However, while such developments have been taking place here over the past few decades, the west has experienced an even greater explosion in neurotechnology that has led to tremendous advances. When the very first rudimentary procedures were being undertaken here fifty years ago, the technology

of today had not been invented. But as the pioneering neurosurgeons in this region made their painstaking advances, the CT scan, MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) and microsurgery were being developed in the west. Now, as surgeons trained abroad return to practice here, many of them leave behind laser technology, endoscopy and gamma knife surgery, which have become established procedures for diagnosis and treatment. Though CT scanners and MRI machines are becoming more common here, surgeons trained here often do not have a chance to master the newer technologies, which are available in only a handful of the larger centres in the region.

This is where the importance of the regional congress becomes apparent. South Asian countries share a similar socioeconomic setting. While this means they also share problems peculiar to the region, there are nevertheless gaps in technology, training and service within the region, as well as between it and the developed regions of the world. Professor Rashid Jooma, Chairman of the Department of Neurosurgery at Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre, Karachi, states, "The provision of neurosurgical services in the region, "High levels of success have been achieved by South Asian neurosurgeons in this difficult speciality, in spite of the many difficulties faced by them." While those that can afford to still seek treatment outside the region, there is affordable neurosurgical treatment of a high

The South Asian Association of Neurosurgeons has, in the two years since its inception, provided an arena for the sharing of experiences, the exchange of ideas and the network of support required for progress in this field throughout the region... Of course there are obstacles to overcome, one of the major ones being the disparity in resources between the different countries within the region.

Dhaka congress, however, is how to deal with these and other disorders and injuries of the brain with technology that is appropriate to the region.

As Professor Upendra Prasad Devkota, President of SAAN and head of the neurosurgical unit at Bir Hospital in Kathmandu, says, "(A) resource-poor region can nevertheless innovatively respond to challenges related to injury and diseases of the brain." While local economy and local pathology are two major factors contributing to the type of neurosurgical services available in the region, Devkota believes that "the most expensive technology is not always the best. We must innovate and use local resources, equipment and technology. The lack of modern technology should certainly not stop us undertaking procedures."

Ramamurthy supports this view: "We should not feel disheartened. All prognoses and procedures as well as many new surgical approaches can and are being carried out in the region without the modern salesmanship of neurotechnology. Gadgets do not necessarily improve skills." Professor Ajit Kumar Banerji, Director and senior neurosurgeon of Vimhans Hospital in New Delhi, describes how Indian and Pakistani manufactured surgical microscopes and endoscopes are examples of appropriate technology that is affordable for the region. However, he raises a note of caution about the term "appropriate technology": "While it is a suitable concept for this part of the world and the constraints we face, we should not let the term restrict us in our progress."

The problem that goes hand in hand with constraints on technological advances is the distribution of neurosurgical services not only throughout the region but also within each country. To make such ser-

vices available and accessible for those living outside the larger cities, particularly for emergency procedures such as head injuries, there are a number of obstacles to overcome simultaneously. Centres are needed in more provincial urban areas for the rural population to access. However, these centres must be provided with the right equipment, and most importantly with appropriately trained surgeons, support staff and technicians.

Professor Rashiduddin Ahmad says, "One of the main problems in Bangladesh is there are not enough trained surgeons in this field. There is currently a total of 40 neurosurgeons, junior and senior, in the whole of the country for a population of 130 million. Because the workload is too heavy, because of the difficulties faced, young doctors do not want to be trained in this field. They also feel the equipment necessary is not available."

Junior neurosurgeons throughout the region today come from a diverse range of training backgrounds. Having received various levels of training from many different countries both abroad and within the region means that standards and qualifications vary greatly. Appropriate levels of training, and proficiency of our training programmes, is a major requirement for achieving higher standards throughout the region, according to Professor Rashid Jooma. Devkota adds, "We must ensure training and qualifications are standardised first at the country level, then at the regional level and finally to international standards."

Iqtidar H. Bhatti, Visiting Professor of Neurosurgery at Ziauddin Medical University, Karachi, believes accreditation of neurosurgeons is important. "The trainers and professors of the region must agree what the training requirements should be. And non-governmental professional neurosurgical societies in the region should offer accreditation. However, it's important that the accreditation bodies must be independent of certification bodies. In this way qualifications can be recognised to be at a standard level."

The South Asian Association of Neurosurgeons has, in the two years since its inception, provided an arena for the sharing of experiences, the exchange of ideas and the network of support required for progress in this field throughout the region. If it can go further and successfully address some of the issues mentioned, then such efforts should be applauded. Of course there are obstacles to overcome, one of the major ones being the disparity in resources between the different countries within the region. How should regional standards be decided in view of this? Can Bangladesh and Nepal catch up with India and Pakistan?

Whether we can achieve the level of sophistication that developed countries have achieved is another question. But as Professor Devkota says, "We have an Everest to climb, that is certain. But there is a north face and a south face and many paths to the top. We may not be able to follow in the footsteps of the west, but we must find our own path."

Rashida Ahmad is a freelance journalist

Behold a Trojan Horse

IKRAM SEHGAL writes From Karachi

AS far back as 1989 it was clear Hubco would be an albatross around Pakistan's neck but we are a glutton for punishment and we persisted with this scam. When eventually confronted, Hubco countered with an extremely effective propaganda campaign, holding the country's financial liquidity hostage and virtually putting all future investment in Pakistan under jeopardy. In this no-win situation we should be thankful we managed to cut our losses and accept, however unpalatable, Hubco's terms for surrender. With a Trojan Horse or two as a trump card up their sleeve, Hubco's investors can be excused for laughing all the way to their private banks.

Someone someday will do an exhaustive case study to include those who (1) conceived this monstrosity both in (a) Pakistan and (b) abroad, to include government and non-government functionaries, international financial technocrats, consultants, etc, (3) nurtured the project, engineers of all kind, bureaucrats, politicians etc, (4) were the investors, Japanese (later replaced by Saudis), British, Singaporean, Americans, etc, (5) built it, mainly construction companies, equipment manufacturers, etc, (6) then profited by it, mainly all of the aforementioned, (7) took part in the cover-up and sustaining of the scam, including WAPDA personnel, (8) acted as accessories to a combination of media and diplomatic blackmail designed to force us to swallow the bitter pill and (9) lastly, whose children's grandchildren will continue paying through their nose for the next millennium, long after Hubco is a pile of rubble and rusted scrap? The macabre part of it is that the people of Pakistan, physical and financial misery notwithstanding, are expected to applaud the third selling of the Eiffel Tower (and this one not by Henry Wilson). Most of the intelligentsia have a fair knowledge of who did what and for whom and at what price to Pakistan. Most did not have the courage to protest, few being beneficiaries directly or indirectly of the scam, are hardly expected to the most expensive oil-fired power plant ever in the world was erected at more than 150 per cent of the standard international cost, now we have to pay exorbitant installment of interests thereof besides an inflated tariff. No matter who is in power, where there is money to be made only the means to siphon the money off change, those who pocket the change and create the means to bank that change, always remain the same. Hubco was conceived during the days of Gen Ziaul Haq, continued with Junejo and survived Ms Benazir and Mian Nawaz Sharif alternately twice. Banks demand infidelity insurance from private security companies against infidelity of their guards. We seriously need to take out infidelity insurance on our negotiators and given their abysmal track record, indemnity insurance on the country's financial

future as well.

Whatever the good intentions of the present military regime, any future government is going to conclude what this government concluded in the beginning, someone gave away the farm in the country's name. As Augustus Ceasar commented about Marc Antony on his giving away half the Roman Empire to Cleopatra, "he gave away to his mistress what was not his to give". Western nations do not condone money-laundering but their laws are contradictory. One can understand their need to protect the rights of their own citizens (confidentiality in this case) but why should they protect those non-citizens who have transferred large amounts of capital into accounts as well as assets without being able to prove the

Cayman Islands, the Channel Islands, etc and other such money havens. Yet because the money has to be spent somewhere, a good amount goes to the USA and UK, whether in acquiring real estate, businesses, making investment or just living the good life of a gentleman squire. In this high-tech world, it requires little effort to electronically trace out the "smoking trail". Those who matter in the country know who was involved in the money being spirited away from Pakistan. Money can hardly be carried away in large suitcases, however large the suitcases. The money has to travel along electronic money transfer route through various financial institutions. Such transactions cannot take place without

private bank assigns a "private banker" or "relationship manager" to act as a liaison between the client and the bank, and to facilitate the client's use of a wide range of financial services and products. These products and services often span the globe, enabling a client to make use of a variety of corporate, investment and trust vehicles, estate and tax planning, and other financial services. In essence, private banks seek to provide global wealth management for the wealthy. Private banks typically charge fees based upon the amount of client "assets under management," and the particular products and services used by the client.

These fees "can exceed \$1 million per client each year". Rumours are that "the idiot" managed 65 individual accounts from Pakistan alone. It would be nice if someone who is already under oath and knows the names discloses them.

Why not list the bankers who have been close to the men and women in power in Pakistan since Gen Ziaul Haq partially restored democracy in 1985? This exercise should not take more than a day. And if we do not find at least half a dozen bankers common to all, present one included, I will apply for a change of name. What is shocking is that those in power know this and still choose to look the other way. Maj Gen (Retd) Naseerullah Khan Babar, former Governor, NWFP and PPP's Federal Interior Minister, is a man whose credibility is unmatched at any level, not many more blunt, honest and forthright men have been born in Pakistan. He openly names two bankers he was about to arrest but was prevented from doing so. Both are thriving today, albeit in different stations in life, with all due respects this is at the expense of the poor, miserable people of Pakistan, condemned to virtual servitude for the next millennium by their "facilitation" to the corrupt provided by these bankers.

Among those successfully charged with financial misdemeanor and jailed by NAB, how many are bankers? Like the river those who facilitated financial crimes go on forever. If history is a good witness, they will always remain in and around the rulers of the country. The common thread to our debt burden for the coming millennium is the lack of morals and conscience of the private bankers of the world. Do we have the moral courage to confront such Trojan Horses?

Among those successfully charged with financial misdemeanor and jailed by NAB, how many are bankers? Like the river those who facilitated financial crimes go on forever. If history is a good witness, they will always remain in and around the rulers of the country. The common thread to our debt burden for the coming millennium is the lack of morals and conscience of the private bankers of the world. Do we have the moral courage to confront such Trojan Horses?

origin of income? Being serious about "corrupt practices", it is in their interest to enquire into the means of such "corrupt practices", particularly to ascertain if any of their corporate entities or citizens were involved in any manner. Moreover, if the individual has not paid taxes in his own country of origin or host country, then why are the laws of the land of his host country, not being applied? When Moinuddin Khan was Chairman CBR, the British Income Tax Authorities requested confirmation whether a person had paid money over to individuals in Pakistan equivalent to about Rs 100 million that was so declared in a particular company's Corporate Tax return in UK. One of the individuals paid, a senior officer serving on contract after retirement, approached Mr Moinuddin Khan and remonstrated about his pursuing the matter.

Did the British authorities ever raise the question again or did they also give way to "discretion"? A lot of the looted money goes to Switzerland, Liechtenstein,

management and intricate control by senior bankers. During the mid-80s Chase Manhattan in Pakistan employed a very prominent person who was not really into banking but was quite influential in government, political and business circles. For want of a better name he was called "a private banker". And he had clout and why not, he was the private banker to politicians, bureaucrats, servicemen, businessmen, waderas, saint-landlords, etc! When the head of Citibank, was questioned in front of a Committee investigating money-laundering by US banks, the answers he gave very intelligently circumvented the truth. He called one of Citibank executives an "idiot" for opening a particular account knowing it to be tainted but conveniently forgot to name the "idiot". And that "idiot" almost became head of a bank in Pakistan recently! Let me quote from the Committee's report, "to open an account in a private bank, prospective clients usually must deposit a substantial sum, often \$1 million or more. In return for this deposit, the



All health information to keep you up to date

Tips on taking medicine

- * Whenever possible, take capsules and tablets while standing, or at least when you are in an upright sitting position, and take them with water. If you take them when you are lying down, or without fluid, it is possible for capsules and tablets to become stuck in the oesophagus. This can delay the action of the drug and may damage the oesophagus.
- * When taking liquid medicines shake the bottle before measuring each dose, or you may give yourself improper dosages if the active substance has risen to the top or settles at the bottom of the bottle.
- * Always measure your dose carefully, using a 5ml spoon when a teaspoon is specified, or an accurate measure such as a dropper, children's medicine spoon, or oral syringe.
- * A drink of cold water taken straight after an unpleasantly-flavoured medicine will often hide the taste.

Tomorrow: Dos and don'ts and other tips

The Changing Face of Crisis

ABUL M AHMAD

THE nation is facing a crisis, but the political leaders would not admit it, shifting the blame on others. Political leadership have a myopic view: "we are doing the best work, and the others are defaulters".

Political crisis is the nation's number two problem. On top of all the problems is the moral crisis. It is getting beyond control, and the political regimes simply cannot contain it (it is like an avalanche). This state of instability simply cannot last. Hence the next few months are critical for the nation. The coming elections are not going to provide a solution. We have to look deeper.

This crisis has been encouraged through poor governance over the decades, including that by outsiders who invaded the political field, as the politicians failed to defend their citadel. There is no point in pointing the finger at the previous regimes. The job of the current and successive regimes is to set the road to recovery from the moral lapses. This is not happening at the pace expected, due to internal weaknesses (ego-centred leadership), and the inability to resist temptation (by all the leaders).

Now the situation has gone beyond the control of the politicians, as religion has violently come into

the arena, and the country is going to see some displays of colourful tamasha in the coming months. The chances of holding normal peaceful elections must be receding each passing day, and all the citizens (voters) are vaguely aware of it, whether interested in politics or not.

The voters are fed up, and need a change of the hacked-up menu. The cooks have to be changed, to revitalize the palate. The style of service has to be changed. No more offerings on thalis. The voters want more options than eroded ideologies. Political fast-food chain? How come? In this age of change, the political leaders are not showing any sign of change. In this information age, the half-life of traditional ideologies has been drastically reduced. The new radioactive elements in the progressive society have to be monitored carefully, for planning future trends.

To face the crisis facing the nation, the non-political leaders of the society have to step forward to bring about the necessary atmosphere for dialogue/s, without bitterness and rancour, as is happening at present. The religious and political issues are ruled by the heart, hence it would be rather naive to depend solely on rational and political solutions. The current style of politics is not solving our problems, as fragmentation is accelerating at an alarming pace.

Governance and administration will have to face the brunt of the insecurity facing the society, as indiscipline and passion rule the day (subtly supported by black money and grey godfathers), and it might be difficult to impose official stands.

Before leadership comes statesmanship, and this is lacking in this country. Sacrifices are talked about loosely; it is time to stand the test in field operations. The leaders must stop fighting at their level, to stop the divisive battles at the lower levels (set examples). The umbrella for peaceful existence has to be crated to restore normal daily life, for which we have been trying for the last three decades. Who will unfurl this shamiama of peaceful coexistence in this homogeneous society?

TOM & JERRY



By Hanna-Barbera

James Bond

