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Man can do everything
if he has dedication.
And dedication comes
from faith
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DR EDRIC BAKER
(1941-2015)

THE GOOD DOCTOR

The man who dedicated his life to helping the helpless

"My days are numbered now," Edric Sargisson Baker told his associates soon after he was diagnosed with pulmonary artery hypertension in 2013.

An accomplished doctor himself, he then described the symptoms that would indicate his time had come.

"When you see these symptoms, do not put me on mechanical ventilation or any other life support," Dr Baker said to the shock of his associates.

"What! Why would you say that?" asked one of them, failing to make sense of Baker's apparently bizarre instruction.

The doctor smiled. "It's because I don't want to receive any treatment that I could not give to my patients."

An uncomfortable silence fell on the veranda of Kailakuri Healthcare Centre that the New Zealander had

established in Tangail over three decades ago.

"I want a Christian funeral for myself," Baker broke the silence.

"And bury me in the backyard of the house," he said, pointing to his humble mud house.

Pijon Nongmin, manager of the Kailakuri Healthcare Project, was narrating this experience two weeks after the death of Dr Baker on September 1.

"And have done exactly what he had wished. We didn't put him on life support during his last days and laid him to rest behind his hut, following proper rituals," he said.

Baker was born to John Baker, a statistician, and Betty Baker, a teacher, at Wellington in New Zealand on August 12, 1941.

After obtaining his MBBS degree

from Otago Medical College in Dunedin in 1965, he joined a government medical team and served in war-ravaged Vietnam twice till 1975. He then went to Zambia and Papua New Guinea to serve the poor there.

In the meantime, Baker completed advanced courses in Australia and England on maternal and child health.

It was between his two Vietnam tours that he came to know about the sufferings of the Bangladeshis.

Stories of the Bangladeshis being tortured by the Pakistani forces during the 1971 Liberation War perhaps grew in him sympathy for the people of Bangladesh, said Pijon, who worked with Dr Baker for over five years.

In 1979, the doctor first came to Bangladesh and joined a Christian

mission hospital in Meherpur. Two years later, he moved to Kumudini Hospital in Tangail. After working there for eight months, he joined a clinic run by the Church of Bangladesh at Thanarbaid of Madhupur in 1983.

But Baker soon realised that he needed to learn Bangla if he really wanted to understand his patients, many of whom were indigenous people. And within a year, he learned to communicate in Bangla.

Immediately after joining Jalchhatra Christian Mission Clinic in Madhupur, he opened a small healthcare centre at Kailakuri in 1983 to deal with the quickly growing number of patients.

Then in 1996, Doktor Bhai, as he was lovingly called by his patients, turned this small chamber into

Kailakuri Healthcare Centre.

"With the kind of expertise he had, Doktor Bhai could have made a career in any developed country and lived a life of luxury. But instead, he chose Bangladesh and a simple life," Pijon told The Daily Star.

"There was no furniture inside his room. Not even a cot. He would sleep on the floor," he added.

During an interview with The Daily Star in 2011, Baker was asked what prompted him to come thousands of miles away from home and work inside a reserved forest area, about 170 kilometres from the capital.

"It's the local people here. They are really very good," he had replied.

"In my childhood, I promised to myself that I would help the helpless. And I am simply living up to that promise."

PROFILE

PERSONAL

Name: Edric Sargisson Baker
Born: 1941, Wellington, New Zealand
Religion: Christianity
Marital Status: Single

EDUCATION

MBBS, Otago Medical College, New Zealand
Post-Grad Diploma in Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, University of Sydney, Australia
Post-Grad Diploma in Obstetrics, University of Auckland, New Zealand
Post-Grad Diploma in Tropical Paediatrics, University of Liverpool, UK

WORK EXPERIENCE

1966-68: Rotating Internship, Wellington Hospital
1969: Third Surgeon, New Zealand Surgical Team, South Vietnam
1970: Obstetrics Internship, National Women's Hospital, Auckland
1971: Medical Registrar, Christchurch Hospital, New Zealand
1972-75: Medical Officer, Kontum Mission Hospital, South Vietnam
1976: Paediatric Registrar, Goroka Base Hospital, Papua New Guinea
1978: Medical Officer, Katete Hospital, Zambia
1979: Paediatric Medical Officer, Monze Hospital, Zambia

IN BANGLADESH

1979-80: Medical Officer, Bollobhpur Mission Hospital, Meherpur
1981: Paediatric Medical Officer, Kumudini Hospital, Mirzapur
1983-2004: Medical Officer-in-Charge, Thanarbaid Clinic (Church of Bangladesh), Tangail
2004-2015: Medical Officer-in-Charge, Kailakuri Healthcare Project, Tangail

AWARD

Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit, 1999



HE WAS SENT BY GOD

Cut off from the nearest town by some 10-20 kilometres of thick forests all around, the people of Kailakuri and adjacent villages didn't have access to trusted medical care in any emergency.

Many would die without treatment, some without even proper diagnosis. And even if some would make it to some distant hospitals, they barely could afford the treatment.

Against this backdrop, Dr Baker came to Kailakuri three decades ago.

"God had sent Doktor Bhai to us as a blessing," said Sabitre Hagidok, an indigenous woman of Kailakuri.

Ever since he came to the village, not a single person died there without treatment, she said a few days after Baker's death.

Puleen Barman, a 45-year-old day labourer from Sherpur's Nalitabari, had been suffering from diabetes and tuberculosis for over a year now.

"I went to many hospitals but never got proper treatment. I couldn't go to work. With five mouths to feed at home, how long could I continue like this?"

"Then last year, I came to Doktor Bhai. He diagnosed me and gave me medicines free of cost. When I came for follow-up treatment three months ago, he advised me to be admitted here.

"I feel a lot better now. But I feel sad to think that the man who did so much for my recovery is no more," Puleen said,



sitting on a bench at Kailakuri Healthcare Centre.

For regular check-ups, Baker charged only Tk 10 from the patients living within a three kilometre-radius of the centre and Tk 20 from those living beyond. After check-up, patients got the required medicines, and they still do, from the centre whether they could afford it or not.

Every day, around 100 outpatients get treatment and medicines for diabetes, TB, fever, cough, burn injuries, stomach problems and complications related to pregnancy, among others.

Those needing long-time treatment are admitted to the 35-bed centre. In addition,

Dr Baker trained up 97 young boys and girls as health assistants and paramedics who visit the neighbouring villages to give treatment to the sick people, especially pregnant women and newborns.

The death of Baker, who had become an integral part of their everyday life, has created a deep void in their heart.

"If I hear a knock on the door," nurse Saleha Begum said, pointing to the entrance to the hospital's outdoor, "I feel like Doktor Bhai would now appear before me and ask, 'Is any patient waiting for me?' ... He was always so careful not to keep anyone waiting."

"With Doktor Bhai's death, I feel as if I

had lost a father," said Sabera Khatun of Kailakuri.

WHAT NOW?

Who will fill Dr Baker's shoes now? A question that has been buzzing around since he passed away.

A doctor couple from the USA are supposed to join the centre, said Pijon Nongmin, manager of the Kailakuri project.

But the wife is expecting now and the delivery date is in February next year. After that, the family will shift here, he said.

"Besides, Gonosasthya Kendra sends medical interns here," he added.

About 85 percent of the centre's annual cost comes from donations from abroad, 10 percent from home and five percent from patients' contribution, said Noor Amin Ratan, assistant director (programme) of the project.

Baker used to collect the money from private donors, including his friends and well-wishers in New Zealand, the US and the UK.

He used to go to New Zealand once a year for visa extension and to collect money for the centre, Ratan added.

Pijon said the donors have assured them of continuing their support.

"Besides, Doktor Bhai once told us, 'Man can do everything if he has dedication. And dedication comes from faith.' We have faith in God, in people, in ourselves," he added.