

GOING GENTLY INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT

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Sabekun Nahar, two-and-a-half-years old, plays on her mother's lap in a stark, sterile ward of Ashic Palliative Care Unit, the country's first-ever paediatric palliative care unit. She is full of life—like other children her age—but her swollen belly, skinny limbs and bald head tell a different story. Nahar was diagnosed with soft tissue sarcoma (stomach cancer) last year, which is now terminal.

"When I gave birth to her, everyone was very happy—she was the first girl in our family. I prayed to the Almighty that He blessed me with Nahar. I don't know why He now wants to take that gift back," says 30-year-old Shimu Akter, Nahar's mother.

After continuing cancer treatment for more than a year at Dhaka Shishu Hospital and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), Akter was informed that the doctors would not be able to continue her daughter's treatment as her physical condition was not good enough to carry on with surgical procedures.

"Though her tumour was cut off, it started swelling again, and at one point of time, she was unable to move. Nahar would cry all the time; she couldn't sleep from the pain. You cannot imagine how excruciating it is for a mother to see her baby fighting against such unbearable pain, and not being able to do anything to make her feel good," she says.

Akter consulted a doctor again, who informed her that she should take Nahar to Ashic Palliative Care Unit, where she could get specialised care providing some relief from the pain and irritation caused by cancer.

"What is her condition now?" I ask.

"Comparatively better," she shares. "Earlier, I could not accept that my daughter cannot be cured. But now I have accepted that I might not have her for long. But you know what? At least now I don't need to see my daughter in excruciating agony and feel helpless. I was afraid we wouldn't be able to afford the care, but Ashic pays the majority of the costs."

"I want my daughter to live in comfort, no matter the number of days she stays with me," Akter smiles sadly.

Comfort rather than cure

When treatments of serious illnesses, such as cancers, chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases (COPD), leukaemia and lymphoma or kidney failures take toll on the body, outweighing the benefits of such

symptoms, for example, intolerable pain and irritation, nausea, decreasing sodium levels in the blood, restlessness, breathing difficulties and so on, and the family members often don't know what to do to reduce the pain of the patients," says Dr. ASM Munim Hossain, Medical Officer, Ashic Palliative Care. Palliative care doesn't only address a patient's physical sufferings but also focuses on improving the quality of life of patients and their families.

Ashic, for instance, has a wish list programme, whereby palliative care patients are given an opportunity to fulfil their last desire. For example, last June, four-year-old Utsho expressed his wish to

works on bringing some semblance of normalcy back in their lives. Apart from that, family members lack knowledge about the disease, making it difficult for them to understand what assistance to provide or what medical treatment to decide on.

Paltry state of palliative care in Bangladesh

In 2014, World Health Health Assembly, the decision-making body of the World Health Organisation (WHO), recommended its 194 member states to incorporate palliative care in mainstream healthcare globally. Though Bangladesh is a

Society of Bangladesh and Afzalunessa Foundation. Besides, CPC has been running a project activity in collaboration with the Worldwide Hospice and Palliative Care Alliances (WHPCA) and World Child Cancer (WCC) in Korail slum, to improve the quality of life of 100 older people and 25 children suffering from life-limiting diseases.

There are also a few private initiatives including Ashic Foundation, Delta Hospital Limited, Shanti Oncology and Palliative Care, and World Hospice Bangladesh, which provide assistance at minimal cost, with financial assistance from donors.

There are still miles to go before Bangladesh can



A 16-year-old terminal patient Sharmin, suffering from Thalassemia, is undergoing palliative treatment at the BSMMU.

PHOTOS: NAYEM SHAAN

According to the Quality of Death Index 2015 by The Economist Intelligence Unit, Bangladesh stands 79th in a list of 80 countries in terms of quality of life during terminal days.

signatory country to the WHO, no significant measures have been taken since then to integrate palliative care.

"Every year, in Bangladesh, approximately 600,000 people can be direct beneficiaries of palliative care, but in reality, we have provided for only 3,000 patients last year," says Professor Nezamuddin Ahmed.

Currently, Bangladesh has limited resources to serve patients who are diagnosed with life-limiting diseases. According to the Quality of Death Index 2015 by The Economist Intelligence Unit, Bangladesh stands 79th in a list of 80 countries in terms of quality of life during terminal days.

Bangladesh has only two government palliative care units—at Dhaka Medical College Hospital and National Institute of Cancer Research and Hospital, with limited resources. BSMMU introduced a unit in 2007 to reduce the sufferings of its patients, which later transformed into the Centre for Palliative Care (CPC) in 2011. This year, a separate 'Palliative Medicine' department has been recognised in BSMMU, where students can undertake a five-year-long post-graduate specialisation in the subject. This recognition makes Bangladesh the 26th country in the world to recognise Palliative Medicine as a medical specialty.

With a dedicated team comprising 10 doctors and 15 nurses, the unit provides most of the medicines free of cost, and receives funding from the Rotary Club of Metropolitan Dhaka (RCMD), Palliative Care

bring about sustainable improvements to palliative care. Dr Ahmed argues that the mindsets of our healthcare providers, consumers and policymakers are holding us back. "Ask an undergraduate medical student whether s/he ever read about death and dying, or received a lecture about end-of-life care, s/he will answer with a 'no'. Additionally, healthcare has become a commodity these days—here, no one wants to buy death!" explains Dr Ahmed.

Dr Zohora Jameela Khan, Associate Professor, DMCH, department of Paediatric Haematology and Oncology, who is also well recognised in the field of paediatric palliative care, emphasises the need to incorporate palliative medicine in undergraduate programmes.

"Besides, we need more people to counsel patients and their families. The palliative care team should also visit the family even after the death of the patient, but in reality, how many of us can go out of Dhaka to meet with them?" adds Dr Khan.

Although death is a normal and inevitable part of our life, most of the time, we consider it taboo. But we should be more realistic and give equal importance to a safe death, just like our importance to safe birth, and attempt to make the last days of someone's life as pleasant as possible. Let that be our vow this 'World Palliative Care Awareness Day-2017 (October 14)'. ■

COMMUNICATION

What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of the Bangladesh Post Office (BPO)? 'Snail mail, stale mail, fail mail' was how a colleague of mine, who had lost a birthday gift or two sent from his friends outside the country some time ago, answers that question.

To be fair to the BPO though, he never really complained or went to the office to ask about his mail. "What's the point of going there? They will probably just tell me that it got lost midway," he assumes.

While it is true that the BPO isn't

the BPO to dispatch its half-yearly Bank statement letters to its clients.

Mandal is of the opinion that the introduction of the digital system can compel more companies to use the BPO for such bulk mail services since they can offer the service to them at half the rate of other courier companies.

Introduction of Cash Cards

While the usage of cash cards from the Bangladesh Post Office may not be very popular in the capital, it is, however, one of the few mediums that the government

Office will need to pay the British Post Office for its services. Similarly if the British Post Office sends 200 packages to Bangladesh and in return if the Bangladesh Post Office sends 100 packages to the UK, the British Post Office will have to pay transfer fees worth 100 packages to Bangladesh.

This entire give-and-take is noted down in the International Postal Account (IPA) of each and every postal service in the world. At the end of each month, the deficit is paid. Recently, the BPO created a digital system to make the entire

their dire situation. "The mail that we send abroad costs less than any other courier service and they reach in time. You can challenge me on that," says BPO Director-General Susanta Kumar Mandal when asked about the issue.

System to improve the work ethic of postmen

$Delivery\ Performance = 100 \times \frac{Number\ of\ posts\ delivered}{Total\ number\ of\ posts\ received} - [Total\ delivered - (Delivery\ kept\ for\ next\ day + Total\ number\ of\ posts\ returned)]$

No, this article on the Bangladesh Post Office hasn't suddenly turned into an algebra lecture. The above formula is actually what the BPO will soon follow in order to 'improve the work ethic of postmen' says Mandal. They have already applied it in Chittagong and two postmen who had a percentage below 60 were show-caused.

"You need strategies to build up

5 REASONS WHY THE POST OFFICE IS NOT OBSELETE... YET

really the first choice for many who want their mail to reach the destination fast and easy, it will be unfair to ignore the changes it has introduced over the years to keep itself relevant in today's fast-paced society.

As the World Post Day, October 9, beckons, *Star Weekend* visits the General Post Office in Dhaka in order to better understand its evolution. The following are a few changes that the BPO has made in the last few years that have not only helped the office stay afloat but also increase its revenue many folds:

Digital Bulk Mail Service

When corporate companies or banks need to dispatch letters in the count of lakhs to their clients they generally prefer using courier companies to complete their tasks for a number of reasons. For one, they are reliable, and secondly, they don't have to take the hassle of sticking stamps on each of the envelopes. However, since July of this year a number of companies have begun using the Bangladesh Post Office for such Bulk Mail services because of the creation of a digital platform where clients can register online and book bulk mail at the BPO.

In the past, the BPO was forced to reject thousands of bulk mail simply because officials weren't able to manually put stamps on each of the envelopes in time. For instance, one operator can manually stick up to 250 stamps a day and the rest of the mails are, therefore, returned. But now the companies are given access to Franking stamp machines, which can be used to stick stamps on each of the envelopes in a very short period of time.

According to the Director-General of BPO, Susanta Kumar Mandal, the usage of the digital bulk mail service by three companies alone, which includes Brac Bank, alone has helped the BPO earn BDT 50 lakhs per month. Brac Bank uses



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

uses to dispatch funds to people living in remote areas. According to Mandal, the BPO dispatched BDT 2200 crore to six lakh women, deserving of the funds, in remote areas in the last three years. The ones who need to receive the funding initially have to go through biometric registration. After that, they are given cards. Once a month, a team from the BPO visits these remote areas in order to dispatch the money. They set up a makeshift ATM at a school where the women can come in and take the money with the help of their cash cards. The advantage of these cash cards is that no extra money is charged for withdrawal as opposed to some other services. In addition, the BPO has struck a deal with a garments factory for paying the salary of their workers through cash cards. If the pilot project goes well, they might further expand the project.

Digital International Postal Account

Say for instance, if someone from Bangladesh needs to send a package to Kenya, it has to go through United Kingdom, and the Bangladesh Post

process smoother. Prior to that, officers would have to manually note down every entry and that, according to Mandal, sometimes led to mistakes, which later had to be corrected.

Strengthening the system for foreign mail delivery

In the past, the cash-strapped BPO often faced problems delivering their packages abroad because they couldn't pay their dues to airlines such as Biman Bangladesh which carried the mail. In addition, the packages also couldn't reach the airport office in time for flights. However, the situation, according to officials from both Biman and BPO, seems to have improved. The dues are met in time and a proper system has been created to ensure that the packages reach the airport office in time for the respective flights. The increment of the salaries of those who sort the mail and ensure that the packages reach the airport on time is one aspect that helped improve the system. For example, sorters used to get just Tk 20, according to Mandal, for every three hours of work on weekends. It just goes on to show

places. This is one of my strategies to ensure that the quality of delivery is good. Based on the numbers I get here, I can assess the quality not only in Dhaka, but everywhere in Bangladesh. It's a good way to observe," says Mandal.

October 9 is celebrated as the World Post Day. The event marks the anniversary of the Universal Postal Union's (UPU) creation back in 1874. It's because of the existence of the UPU today that people around the world are able to exchange mail with such ease.

The organisation has defined set rules for the exchanges among its 192 member countries and continues to set policies based on its three pillars: innovation, integration and inclusion.

At a time when communication landscapes are constantly changing, it won't be a surprise if addressing the first pillar of the UPU, for postal unions around the world, turns out to be difficult. In a world that's surpassing one digital boundary after the other, how does the postal service remain relevant? Or rather, how much can they 'innovate' to remain relevant?

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treatments, the goal of a patient's care starts to change. During this time, s/he might need comfort rather than cure. Palliative care helps patients spend their remaining time on earth in relative comfort, alleviating their pain.

In Bangladesh, however, the healthcare system is prevention and cure-oriented—to a point that at times it ignores a patient's well-being. As Dr Nezamuddin Ahmed, Professor and Chairman, Department of Palliative Medicine, Centre for Palliative Care, BSMMU argues, "There is a denial of the inevitability of death and the need to provide specialised comfort to those with terminal diseases and limit their physical, social, psychological and spiritual sufferings."

When curative treatments fail at hospitals, patients like Sabekun Nahar are discharged and parents usually take them home. "But there might be

visit Shyamoli Shishumela, and so they arranged a trip for him accompanied by one of their supervisors.

Additionally, terminal patients also need psychosocial counselling to deal with the trauma of their suffering and confronting the possibility of death. "I remember a child named Bijoy who died last year. He often wanted to talk to me, and sometimes used to ask me, 'Why has God chosen me?' or 'What sin have I committed?' and so on. We too feel bad, but we would try to make him understand that it wasn't his fault or it didn't make his life any less important," shares Dr Hossain.

It is not just the patient who needs care and counselling, but also family members who live with the trauma of the impending death of a loved one. The palliative care team helps provide emotional support to the family members of the patient and