



## A DECADE OF HEART CARE

# Efforts Fall Short of Need

**BISHAKHA DEVNATH**

Abul Bashar went back home on Wednesday having waited for a heart surgery for two weeks at a public hospital in Dhaka. Exhausted from seeking out all the options, the 70-year-old and his family decided to give in to what fate has in store for them.

A patient of hypertension for more than a decade, he was diagnosed with heart block in April this year. Doctors at Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH), the only public hospital outside Dhaka that has the infrastructure and manpower to conduct cardiac surgeries, suggested implanting stents. A stent is a spring-like object placed to open up a blocked artery of the heart.

The attempt of stenting failed and he was referred to the National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases (NICVD) for a bypass

surgery. Since construction work was ongoing at the NICVD, Bashar's wife Julekha Begum was told that an operation as critical as an open heart surgery would be highly risky for the dust all around.

What were the alternatives remaining then? Not many. And the cost goes higher and higher when patients have to move from a government hospital to an autonomous to a non-profit organisation to a private organisation.

### FACILITIES CONCENTRATED IN DHAKA

According to the latest data from Bangladesh Association of Cardiovascular and Thoracic Anaesthesiologists, the country has only 25 cardiac care facilities, both public and private, equipped to conduct cardiovascular surgeries. Twenty of them are in Dhaka, two in Chittagong, one in Sirajganj,

one in Khulna and one in Dinajpur.

The surgery unit at Zia Heart Foundation, a non-profit facility in Dinajpur, has not been functional since 2016. Its secretary-general AK Azad says the reason is that the cost of running the unit was much more than its income. All the equipment there is now sitting idle.

The scenario is grim. From existing data and talks with a number of cardiologists and cardiac surgeons, The Daily Star learnt that the number of facilities is far less than what is necessary to cater to patients suffering from cardiac problems.

There has been no survey to put a figure around the number of cardiac patients in the country.

But according to the World Health Organisation, there has been an increasing trend in the mortality rate of patients with cardiovascular diseases. In 2014,

such patients accounted for 17 percent of total deaths whereas nearly three decades earlier all non-communicable diseases together, including heart diseases, had been responsible for only eight percent of total mortality.

The numbers don't reflect the development measures taken in the cardiac healthcare industry, probably because it fell behind the pace at which patients grew.

Rasul Amin, a cardiologist from Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), said cardiac care has improved from what it was in the '80s and '90s.

Patients at the time used to go to neighbouring India and Thailand for interventional procedures like angiogram, a type of X-ray imaging to see the heart's blood vessels, and implanting stents, he said, adding that these services are available now not only in Dhaka but



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