



Marium Begum, age 35, has been suffering from bone cancer for the last two years. She has to come to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) every week from Narayanganj to get radiotherapy. Her treatment and travel expenditure, amounting to BDT 20,000 per month, is becoming a huge burden on her family.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Traditional stoves causing lung cancer in women

SHADMA MALIK

Ayena was trying to be as quick as possible, adding woodchips to the flame under a clay cooking stove by a roadside in the capital's Rampura. A crowd of half a dozen people was waiting for her to deliver the pithas (a kind of cake).

Every winter, she sets a little pitha shop out in the open, selling the sweet and savory treats every day to make a living. What Ayena doesn't realise is that the smoke from the traditional clay stoves can actually kill her.

Like 34-year-old Ayena, many middle-aged women sell pithas on the roadside during winter. They use firewood and clay stoves to make them, completely unaware that this can lead to hazardous impacts on health. They remain oblivious that the smoke spewing from traditional clay stoves can cause cancer.

According to a study by the Medical Oncology Department, National Institute of Cancer Research and Hospital (NICRH), lung cancer is the most common cancer in women. It shows that 12 percent of about 1,500 women diagnosed with cancer are patients of lung cancer.

An increasing number of women are being diagnosed with lung cancer after years of exposure to black smoke, said Dr Muhammad Rafiqul, lead researcher of the study. He further added that the average age of female lung cancer patient is 55.25 years old.

"Passive smoking can cause lung cancer too," he added.

The study was done on cancer patients who visited the NICRH's Oncology Department between January and June 2018.

Explaining why the findings have raised concerns, Rafiqul said that most women in Bangladesh don't smoke, but lung cancer is as prevalent here as it is in the USA where smoking is commonplace among women.

One reason for this high prevalence of lung cancer in women in the country could be the practice of cooking with firewood, he added.

CANCER CARE SERVICES

RIDICULOUSLY INADEQUATE

Observe health experts, seek visionary govt policy to detect the deadly disease early

PORIMOL PALMA

Even though cancer is a major cause of death and much physical, financial, mental and emotional suffering, the current situation of cancer prevention and treatment in the country is ridiculously inadequate, claim health experts.

A national cancer registry, a very basic aspect that can aid in better diagnosis and treatment of the diseases, is not in place to document and analyse the trend of various forms of cancer.

This situation persists despite

the fact that according to the International Agency for Research on Cancer report last year, about 1.08 lakh people die while 1.5 lakh people develop cancer every year in Bangladesh.

At any given time, there are an estimated 12 lakh cancer patients in the country, says Dr Habibullah Talukder Ruskin, Associate Professor and Head of Cancer Epidemiology at the National Institute of Cancer Research and Hospital (NICRH).

"Despite this staggering number, there are sadly only around 500 beds for cancer patients in

the public hospitals," he told The Daily Star on January 28.

Taking into account both the private and public sectors, there are only around 200 cancer specialists in the country, which is too insufficient a number to meet the needs of cancer patients, he says.

"Less than a third of all cancer patients can avail treatment," he further states, adding that the rich and well-to-do mostly go to private hospitals or abroad for treatment, while the poor go to the public hospitals. Many die with inadequate or no treat-

ment, he adds.

Cancer is a disease involving abnormal growth with the potential to spread to other parts of the body. Some of the common factors leading to cancer, says Ruskin, are chemical-tainted food, obesity, low level of physical activity, consumption of tobacco, betel nut and alcohol, and air pollution.

Other factors like Hepatitis B and C, lack of hygiene during menstruation, HPV (a sexually transmitted infection), child marriage, birth of too many children within short gaps and

not breastfeeding babies can also contribute to cancer, he added.

LACK OF VISION

Prof Dr Rashid-E-Mahbub, Chairman of the National Committee on Health Rights Movement, says that the rising trend of cancer is not new in the country. However, the authorities don't have a vision to address this threat.

Developed countries prioritise prevention and early detection of cancer over treatment, he adds.

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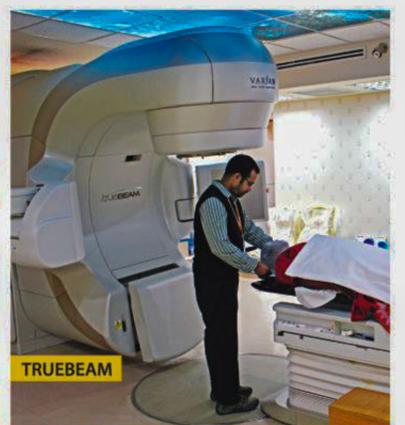
World Cancer Day
4 February

UNITED HOSPITAL CANCER CARE CENTRE

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