



PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Caught Between Life and Traffic

PROMITI PROVA CHOWDHURY

On September 6, while sitting outside the intensive care unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH), a small businessman by the name of Md Rabiul Alam narrates the maddening experience of transporting his almost-dying daughter from Gazipur.

The 17-year-old girl had overdosed herself with multiple drugs. She was first taken to Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmad Medical College in Gazipur. There, she fell unconscious after getting her stomach pumped. The doctors quickly referred her to DMCH, says Rabiul.

"We took one of the private ambulances standing outside the hospital. It got stuck as soon as we reached Jasimuddin Avenue in Uttara. It was moving at a snail's pace until we passed the airport. The whole road was packed with trucks and private cars and no-one bothered to make way for us despite seeing the siren on," describes the distressed father.

"At one point, I got out of the ambulance and yelled at them. But no one paid any heed. Anything could have happened in that two-and-a-half hour journey." According to Google Maps, when traffic is at its lightest, at dawn for example, such a journey would have taken only an hour.

An ambulance driver of DMCH, Md Rana, had a more terrifying tale to share. About two months ago, he was carrying a man aged around 26 year to the National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases from DMCH. "We got stuck at a traffic signal as soon as we reached the Manik Mia Avenue. We could not move an inch for half an hour. The patient's condition deteriorated, his eyes started to bleed. He probably had a stroke and was declared dead after reaching the hospital."

Zia Hawlader, a CNG-run auto-rickshaw driver, recalls how once he had to follow an ambulance carrying a critical patient—and he managed to reach the hospital before the ambulance. "A police officer from Razarbagh Police Lines was being taken to Square Hospital in Panthapath. His relatives boarded my vehicle and told me to follow the ambulance. But I reached half an hour earlier than the ambulance."

WHAT'S IN OUR AMBULANCES?

With traffic taking up valuable time from a patient's life, how equipped are our ambulances to deal with patients in critical conditions?

Currently there are 265 private ambulance services registered under the Dhaka Metropolitan Ambulance Owners Association Ltd. Out of the 1,500 ambulances, only 30 has ICUs (Intensive Care Unit), according to Md Alamgir Hossain, president of the association.

The normal ones have oxygen cylinders and first-aid boxes while the ICU ambulances have a ventilator, cardiac monitor, syringe pump, one paramedic (commonly known as brother), and one doctor.

Alamgir admitted that although drivers and helpers have basic training on handling oxygen, saline, blood transfusion etc, paramedics were essential given Dhaka's traffic situation.

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