

‘Not a single person should be left undetected’

Prof. Muzaherul Huq, former adviser, South-East Asia region, World Health Organization (WHO), and founder, Public Health Foundation of Bangladesh, talks to Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star about the way forward in our fight to contain the spread of Covid-19.

How would you evaluate the Covid-19 situation in Bangladesh? What’s your take on the zoning system proposed by the government which is already being enforced in some areas on a trial basis to contain the spread of the virus?

There are ways to ease lockdown in a scientific way and the WHO has some specific suggestions on how and when to do it. The number one suggestion given by the WHO is that a country must control the transmission before easing the lockdown, which, unfortunately, has not been the case in Bangladesh. Also, the principles of enforcing a lockdown had not been properly followed here. As a result, the transmission has spread further and the number of deaths has also increased.

About the zoning system, I congratulate the government for taking this decision but I have some reservations about it too. My suggestion was to implement a district-wise zoning system. If we could divide the 64 districts into red, yellow and green zones, and completely enforce lockdown in the red zones, we would get the expected result.

There was a time when only a number of people were infected with Covid-19 in a few districts. But instead of shutting down those districts, the government enforced a lockdown in the whole country, which was a wrong decision at that time.

Let me give you an example of how the zoning system should work. My home district Munshiganj has about 600 Covid-19 patients now. Five to six lakh people live in each of the six upazilas of the district. In Srinagar upazila, the number of infected people is around 60. If 60 people out of 6 lakh are infected, it should not be very difficult to control the spread in the upazila. We can easily limit the transmission by isolating these 60 people in the upazila health complex or in a hospital or their homes, and quarantine the 300 people who came in contact with them (assuming that each infected person could spread the virus to at least five persons) in a school. Also, Dhaka being a Covid-19 hotspot, no one from Dhaka should be allowed

to enter Srinagar during the lockdown period. However, all the economic activities of the upazila can continue.

Locking down a particular area might bring some good results in that area if all the principles of a lockdown are properly followed. However, it will not improve the overall situation of Dhaka. Also, lockdown should be enforced in the red zones for at least three weeks—a 15-day lockdown will not have much of an impact. During this lockdown, our aim should be to detect every Covid-19 patient, do proper contract tracing, and quarantine the infected and those who came in contact with them.

What should be our containment plan for Dhaka given its high population density? The transmission in New York City could be contained through taking only three measures: imposing lockdown, conducting contract tracing and carrying out as many tests as possible. We also need to strictly enforce these measures to contain the transmission in Dhaka. I once suggested that makeshift quarantine facilities be built on the Ijtema ground or in Kurmitola stadium with proper toilet facilities. While the infected people should be isolated in hospitals, those who have come in contact with them should be kept in the quarantine facilities.

Based on the official numbers of confirmed cases and deaths, is it possible to guess when we might be reaching the peak of the curve? Firstly, the number of positive cases that we have now is not the real number of people infected in the country. It is the number of people infected among the number of people tested. With increased tests, the number will also increase. So, we cannot predict the real number of infections until we make tests widely available and easily affordable to all.

If we only consider the available information to understand the disease curve (since we do not know the real number of infections), we still see that it is steadily climbing. But as we have been conducting tests on a limited scale,

nobody can scientifically predict when we will be reaching the peak.

Now, the basic principle to contain the transmission should be that not a single person can be left undetected. One undetected person will spread the virus to three to five persons, and those five persons each will spread it to another five persons. So, we need to bring the whole country under the purview of tests and ensure proper contract tracing.



Muzaherul Huq

What are your thoughts on herd immunity? Bangladesh cannot afford to achieve herd immunity because of its population density and its unprepared healthcare system. The only countries that had tried to go for herd immunity were the UK and Sweden. England later abandoned the idea and went for a lockdown while Sweden has never imposed a lockdown. However, Sweden has been enforcing strict measures such as social distancing and health hygiene protocols as well as implementing some laws to control the transmission. The country also has specific directives on reopening the shops, restaurants and factories. This is by far the only country in

the world that did not go for lockdown and is still thinking about herd immunity.

But for Bangladesh, such a decision will only end in a disaster. If we have to achieve herd immunity, 80 percent of our population—13.5 to 14 crore of our 17 crore people—will have to be infected. Since 15 percent of the infected people need to go into isolation in hospitals on an average, more than two crore of our population will have to go into isolation. Among these two crore people, five percent will need ICU facilities. In a normal situation, 2/3 ICU beds are needed for every lakh of people. While we need to have 5,500 ICU beds in our hospitals in a normal situation, our public and private hospitals combined have only 1,200 ICU beds now. Thus, if we go for herd immunity and five percent of our two crore people need ICU facilities, we will need some 10 lakh ICU beds which our health system will never be able to afford. Therefore, we have to contain the spread of the virus at all costs, which is the only available option for us.

What can Bangladesh learn from other countries’ experiences?

While there are countries that are conducting more than one lakh tests every day, our number of tests is limited between 10,000 and 15,000 per day. All the SAARC countries except Afghanistan are conducting more tests than Bangladesh. The sooner we will increase the number of tests, the better result we will get.

In Kathmandu, Nepal, the lockdown has not been eased yet. People are staying at home while only police and the military are on the streets. Only one person from each family is allowed to go out to buy the groceries and other daily necessities within a fixed time. In Colombo, Sri Lanka, the government announced a curfew to contain the spread of the virus. Although Sri Lanka is now easing the lockdown, they are doing so following the WHO guidelines. These are some examples that Bangladesh can learn from.

How can we prepare our healthcare system for the coming days?



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND
I had a senior colleague at Jahangirnagar University who was known to his students at the Pharmacy Department as an eccentric genius. He would often take classes for hours, ignoring the fact that the day had turned into night. He once

told me about a top student who came to the class without his textbook. The boy got told off, who later confessed to his teacher that he could not afford to buy the book. My colleague gave him Tk 2,000 and warned him that he must not come to class without the text. In the next class, the boy showed up again without the text. He was wearing a new pair of jeans and a pair of sneakers. The professor asked the boy to meet him in his office, and demanded an explanation. The boy was in tears. He said, “Sir, I can read the book sitting in the seminar library. But the amount of insults I have to face because of my worn-out sandals and trousers is unbearable.”

I know of many teachers who help their students on a regular basis. I once had a student who would sleep on the temple floor in exchange for volunteering as a cleaner because he did not want to get mixed up in politics for securing a seat in the dorm. I had a student whose father was a vegetable seller, who has now graduated and become a banker. We often say, a public university is the microcosm of a country. The only criterion that matters in a university, theoretically speaking, is merit. It is no secret that there are poor students. Our job as educators is to make sure these students learn to make the best use of their time at the university so that they have a sustainable future.

So it came as a shock to me that a vice-chancellor of a university, the guardian of the institution, has failed to recognise such reality. The VC of Jagannath University (JnU) snubbed requests for financial aid for accommodations for students by saying he was unaware of the fact that he had allowed such beggars to get admitted to the university. I shall spare my

readers the slang he used to dismiss the request.

Even at the private universities, we get many requests for financial aid. In most cases, students do not have any contingency plan. If an earning member of the family dies or loses her or his job, their wards get stranded half way through their education. In many cases, we have donated money or involved the alumni to ensure the graduation of a student. The institutions cannot be very lenient for a number of practical reasons. But there is a limit to what we can do in our personal capacities. It pains us to see students dropping out because they could not bear the cost of education.

In the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, the underbelly of our economic structure has become exposed. The financial insecurities became evident as requests for aid started pouring in. Many students have not enrolled in the coming semester, most likely due to financial reasons. Some universities are making large claims of their generosity. In contrast, we have seen students and parents showing resentment against the fees that are being imposed. Already, we have come across news of guardians and students being at loggerheads over the payment of tuition fees of English-medium schools. Some private schools charge exorbitantly high fees, and with the transitioning of education to the online platform, the stakeholders are now asking about the savings being made in operating expenses.

In the public system, such questions are not encouraged. Those involved in administering the system often resort to a power position to give the impression that education is a privilege. They forget that the students have made their way through hard work and merit. And the privilege to which they are entitled is guaranteed by the constitution, and sponsored by the taxpayers. The JnU VC’s outburst shows a total disregard for such conditions. There is no shame in being poor, but there is shame in harbouring poor mentality.

As we are trying to solidify our position as a middle-income country, the time has come to change our attitude towards education. This year, the government has allocated Tk 24,937 crore for the primary and mass education ministry, Tk 33,118 crore for the

secondary and higher education division, and Tk 8,345 crore for the technical and madrasa education division. The share of allocation in the GDP stands at 2.09, against the UNESCO recommended allocation of 6 percent.

The Daily Star reports that this year’s budget has failed to take the emergency requirements into consideration, and remained very traditional in its outlook. It quoted a survey that predicted that because of the coronavirus crisis, the education sector will see a spike in dropouts at schools, increase of malnutrition



“The cost of education is high, but the cost of ignorance is higher.”

in students impacting their learning ability, rise in child labour and early marriages. From an institutional perspective, the migration to the post-Covid-19 “new normal” situation will require massive investments in infrastructural development and individual support base.

The government, of course, remains committed to implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It has already taken a few laudable steps such as free books for all primary and secondary school students, nationalisation of thousands of schools, creation of six specialised universities, adoption of an ICT master plan, need and merit based stipends and scholarships. Yet for the changes that we want to see by 2020 and beyond, the budget falls short in both vision and scope.

For instance, there is no special allocation to

upgrade the status of our universities. The poor show of our universities in world rankings is symptomatic of our deficiencies in institutional infrastructure, impactful research, and value addition. Only Dhaka University, which will celebrate its 100 years next year, has found itself outside the 1000 club of world universities, according to Times Higher Education. Others do not even appear in the radar. Something is essentially wrong with our education system. And money alone will not solve the problem.

What we need the most is a group of people

who really care for the system. If necessary, we need to bring back some veteran educationists who are working abroad with the exposure to the best practices. Pakistan and India have benefitted from this reverse brain drain. We need to engage various stakeholders, and listen to their needs. Our curricula needs to be adjusted according to the needs of the changing ecology of the workplace. We need to figure out a way to strengthen our skills-based vocational education system, so that the pressure on higher education is eased. Not everyone needs a Master’s degree. It is not something that you do while waiting for BCS results. Why burden the system if you really do not want to specialise in a given area for further research? We need to check the temptation of the numbers game. Inflated pass figures and

In order to provide treatment to the growing number of Covid-19 patients, we need to completely overhaul our healthcare system. First, we need to bring all the public and private hospitals—both at the national level as well as at the district and upazila (sub-district) level—under a common management system through public-private partnerships. Without a well-coordinated response, this grave health crisis cannot be handled. Let me mention some steps that should be taken immediately.

Let’s start from the upazila level. Isolation facilities must be ensured at the upazila level hospitals which should also have the necessary equipment such as oxygen masks, nasal cannula, oximeters and an oxygen supply system in cylinders, to provide treatment to the Covid-19 patients. As skilled manpower will be needed to operate the equipment, the healthcare workers across the country should be provided with necessary training immediately. If we can treat Covid-19 patients at the upazila level hospitals, the national level hospitals will not be overburdened with patients.

In the district level hospitals, there should be ICU beds, ventilators and oxygen storage facilities. I particularly thank our prime minister for directing all district level hospitals to arrange for ICU beds. I think a deadline should also be set by the government in this regard.

And since all the national level hospitals are overburdened with patients, ICU facilities at these hospitals should be increased in proportion to the number of people in the divisional cities. I propose that there should be 300 ICU beds in Chattogram while in Dhaka the number should be increased to 2,000 immediately. I would also suggest that the government should give the responsibility of containing the transmission in each district to the civil surgeons of the district.

If we can take these decisions on a priority basis, we may expect to see a change in the Covid-19 situation in the country. So let’s take the right decisions now and implement those decisions with sincerity.

success rates can momentarily boost our egos, but they fall flat when they are run through the quality control system of the workplace.

Cosmetic construction of buildings and labs will not give us the quality education that we want under SDG 4. There has to be a complete re-hauling of the sector where the primary and secondary systems become the real backward linkage for the tertiary system. The public-private gap is ever-widening because money seems to be the only currency that endorses education. The private system (at least the better institutions) is under constant pressure to perform to attract its students; the public system, by contrast, is suffering from complacency.

When a VC of a public university looks at his students with a bi-focal lens that brings the rich students nearer and pushes away the poorer ones, we realise that there is a dearth of empathy. We need more teachers like my colleague I mentioned at the beginning: people who really care for imparting knowledge, people who really care for their students. Instead, we are seeing the institutions being run by people with vested motives. Often we get to see how public funds are misused or used for personal gains. A classroom requires a good teacher whose bare necessities are met so that she or he can fully commit themselves to the students. The reality is, we see hungry primary school teachers striking on the streets while digital attendance systems or CCTV cameras to pry on their privacy are being installed in classrooms.

The budgetary allocation for education is insufficient. Given the predicted recession, it is probably understandable. We need to at least make sure that the money is well-spent. At the same time, there has to be some policy to engage different organisations to build institutional partnerships to ensure that these limited resources are shared and utilised properly, and with complete accountability and transparency.

The cost of education is high, but the cost of ignorance is higher.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



HISTORIC MEETING BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH KOREAN LEADERS
June 13, 2000
On this day in 2000, South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung met North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in a summit that marked the first meeting between heads of the two countries, helping earn Kim Dae-Jung the Nobel Peace Prize.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Point of land

5 Acquire

10 Rome’s river

12 Spotted steed

13 Justice Kagan

14 Superfluous

15 Pricing word

16 “– a deal!”

18 That woman

19 Genève’s nation

21 Base meal

22 Printer problems

24 Luminous glows

25 Very full

29 Plants

30 Usual practice

32 Shoe shade

33 Conical cap

34 “The Simpsons” clerk

35 Ouzo flavor

37 Woody Allen film

39 Personal

40 “Of Thee _”

41 Daughter of Lear

42 Shrewd

DOWN

1 Flight makeup

2 Accumulate

3 Portugal’s place

4 Hamilton’s bill

5 Big galoots

6 Blend

7 Patriot’s tune

8 Accent

9 Takes to the sky

11 Elevate

17 Patio’s kin

20 Bombards with messages

21 Ball wear

23 Hot tub’s kin

25 Woodward of movies

26 Storefront feature

27 And others: Latin

28 Athlete’s no-no

29 Flight unit

31 Oppressively humid

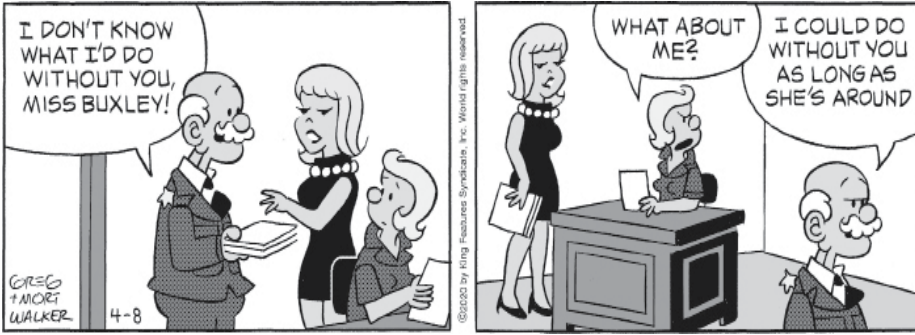
33 Terrarium plant

36 Green shade

38 PC key

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER



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