

Two tests with a single kit!

Govt-approved labs must follow the standard guidelines

THE revelation that at least four government-approved laboratories in the country have been using one kit for testing two Covid-19 samples is alarming. The practice is not only unscientific and unethical but likely to give incorrect results, as health experts have said. Apparently, shortage of testing kits has prompted these labs to resort to this practice which seems to be carried out under the watch of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

The officials of the labs conducting such tests are saying that they are using half of the reagent in the kit for testing each sample and are getting the same result as achieved with the use of one kit for one test. According to them, they have conducted such tests after Bangladesh Livestock Research Institute did a study on this new method and found positive results. However, the fact is that the study only had a sample size of 15 which they tested in three days. So, the question that naturally arises is, can such a major decision regarding Covid-19 test be taken by conducting a study with such a small sample size?

Also, why has the DGHS allowed such an unethical practice to go on? Last month when it was reported in the media that many laboratories could not conduct tests as per their capacity due to a shortage of testing kits, the DGHS outright rejected the claim and said that there was no shortage of testing kits, and that more kits would be imported soon. Now it is clear that their claim was not true at all. Otherwise, why would they not take any action against these labs and allow them to conduct two tests with one kit instead?

Bangladesh has already earned a bad reputation in the world for the fake Covid-19 tests conducted by some of its private hospitals. It is also one of the countries in the world that is conducting the lowest number of tests. And now we have come to know about this improper use of Covid-19 test kits. Needless to say, the consequences of this practice will be huge—it will be difficult for us to contain the spread of the virus through such unscientific practices; and it will also affect our national image.

Therefore, we urge the government to give strict directives to the laboratories to stick to the standard practice followed by the world in conducting Covid-19 tests. One kit should be used for one test and there is no scope of compromising the reagents. And since shortage of testing kits is the reason for such an unethical practice, the government should take immediate action to provide the required number of kits to all the laboratories concerned.

A police officer worthy of his title

This is the kind of bravery that we expect from our police

IN a display of amazing courage and great composure, police constable Atikur Rahman saved three young boys from drowning in the Hoja river of Rajshahi's Durgapur upazila—all on his own. Having been woken up in the morning by his wife, Atikur found out that three boys between the ages of 10-11 had fallen into the river, the water of which had risen recently because of the floods. The boys, who were playing on a nearby submerged bridge, had been swept away many yards by the river's strong currents.

By the time Atikur arrived on the scene, hundreds of people had already gathered around the river. Many were busy taking photographs and videos, but none had volunteered to make an attempt to save the lives of the three boys who had grown exhausted fighting the river currents. Without any hesitation, Atikur, with the help of a bamboo pole that his wife gave him, jumped into the river and slowly rescued the boys one by one. And this was not the first time that he showed such incredible bravery. About 13 years ago, Atikur had similarly saved his younger brother, who was only four years old at the time, from drowning in a village pond when he himself was only an intermediate student.

For his most recent deed, Atikur was rewarded with a certificate and Tk 30,000 in cash by the Rajshahi Superintendent of Police, who said that the district police would recommend Atikur's nomination for a national reward. We too would like to make a similar recommendation.

It is these kinds of heroic actions that we expect to see from our police officers. Unfortunately, the image of our police is often tainted by the activities of errant police personnel. However, we sincerely hope that the great majority of our police officers will choose to follow the example set by Atikur of serving the people and putting public interest above everything else.

Rejoinder, our reply

The National Institute of Cancer Research and Hospital (NICRH) has sent a rejoinder against an editorial of *The Daily Star* titled "Patients continue to be denied treatment". The rejoinder, signed by Prof Dr Qazi Mushtaq Hussain, director and professor of radiotherapy department at NICRH, claimed that the information cited was "totally incorrect". It said that cancer patients at the hospital are treated as per international guidelines set in ASCO, ESMO and BSRO that maintain that the patients should test negative for Covid-19 before any chemotherapy, radiotherapy or surgery. It also said that unlike the information cited in the June 18, 2020 editorial, the hospital has been admitting patients without Covid-19 test results in separate wards since June 9, 2020. After their admission, tests for Covid-19 are conducted, followed by treatment and consultation.

Our Reply

The editorial comment was in reference to a report that was based on a personal interview with a cancer patient, who was found lying on the floor of the entrance to the aforementioned hospital on June 16.

THE SOUND & THE FURY
SUSHMITA S. PREETHA

IT really warms my cold, judgmental heart when I hear grandiloquent statements from Bangladeshi RMG factory owners about the importance of ethical business as they plead with big global

brands to "do the right thing" and "stand by poor Bangladeshi workers". After a decade of reporting and researching on labour rights violations and crackdowns on workers for demanding better wages and work conditions, it is comforting to say the least, to hear such passionate proclamations of their commitment to the workers who have helped them build million-dollar empires. There's nothing like a pandemic and billions of dollars' worth of cancelled orders to bring the haves and the have-nots under the same banner of "wronged", and for the former to finally realise the folly of prioritising profit over people.

Imagine my disappointment, then, when I hear accounts from workers and labour activists on the ground which suggest otherwise. Even the official statistics do not paint a benevolent picture of the owners' performance. Workers are being dismissed from their jobs on a weekly basis despite repeated calls by the government to not terminate workers during the pandemic and a rather successful #PAYUP Campaign that has managed to shame many of the world's biggest brands into committing to fulfil their obligations to their suppliers. According to the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE), as of July 10, over 26,110 workers have been dismissed, 14,132 have been laid off, and 1,55,010 workers have been retrenched since the onset of Covid-19. While these statistics are alarming enough, what's even more distressing is that there's no documentation of how many of these workers received full compensation in accordance with the country's labour laws. Labour unions say an overwhelming majority did not receive anything at all or only received a fraction of their owed wages, severance and other dues, and that there's little recourse available for most of them, given the sheer scale of the violations and the limited scope in which courts and unions are operating.

Workers in the industrial belts claim that in many cases factories forced them to resign rather than dismissing them, which robbed them of their termination benefits that could have helped them tide through the depressed economy for at least a couple of months. In March-April, factories by and large forced workers with less than a year of experience to resign, paying them only the running

months' salary. In June and July, factories overwhelmingly targeted pregnant workers, according to labour activists and media reports. I spoke to 20 women from 12 different factories over the past month who have either been dismissed or forced to resign, without payment of their maternity benefit or any other dues. Some of these women were told to stay home during the lockdown by their respective factory management—"for their own safety"—but were subsequently dismissed for missing work when they eventually reported to their workstations after Eid. Yet others were let go because they fell sick, made a minor mistake or failed to meet their production targets. Some of these women say they are afraid to raise the issue with the authorities or file a case as their husbands also work in the same factory and they can't afford for both to lose their job.



PHOTO: TASLIMA AKHTER

Even for those lucky enough to still have jobs, work conditions have deteriorated drastically since the onset of the pandemic. Rukhsana, who works at a factory in Ashulia that sources for Bestseller, Next and Matalan (according to a database of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Owners' Association shared with *The Daily Star* in May), says that she has been working 12-13 hour shifts every day since her factory reopened in May and is having to meet production quotas that are 30-40 percent higher than their usual targets.

"There were 22 lines in my floor—now there are 13. We have to finish our own targets as well as that of the closed lines. I keep my head down since I still have a job and try to finish my work, but it's impossible to meet the targets that they are setting," she says. "First, they got rid of the helpers, who would help us cut the threads. Then, they increased our targets from 100 pieces per hour to 120 pieces, then 130 pieces, now they are asking us to make 150 pieces! I work through lunch every day, I don't drink water lest

I have to go to the bathroom, and stay back late even after our shift is over—how can I possibly do more? My whole body is in pain, I don't get any strength in my hands... and when I go back home, even the sight of my child makes me angry and depressed because I have to cook for and tend to him."

As per the law, RMG workers can work a maximum of two hours' overtime a day, with the average workweek not exceeding 56 hours. But Rukhsana's week these days consists of 70-80 hours of work. Worse still, she is not being paid any overtime for this extra work. "I was so tired and sick one day that I said I can't do extra work today, and my supervisor threatened to fire me without giving me a penny of what I'm owed. I've worked here for 10 years. Do I have any right to protest this injustice? I am supposed to be grateful to have a job. It's like all considerations of

little recourse left for workers who are wrongfully terminated or targeted because of their affiliations with unions.

To make matters worse, at least eight factories I know of have filed cases against hundreds of named and unnamed workers who are taking to the streets to protest months of non-payment of wages and benefits. I don't yet know the details of these cases to claim that workers were falsely charged. But even if, for argument's sake, the workers did resort to violence, as I am sure the factory management would have us believe, could we really blame them for their increasing desperation when their pleas during these incredibly trying times have been met with silence at best, and police violence at worst?

Asraf Ali, for one, has been patiently and peacefully protesting since March, but he still doesn't know when, if ever, he'll receive his due wages, severance pay and share of provident fund. After staging multiple protests at the height of the lockdown, he and his colleagues were informed by BEPZA in April that their factory, A-One BD Ltd, had gone out of business and that they would be paid once the sale was completed within a couple of months. Since then, they've pleaded with the authorities on numerous occasions to speed up the process of clearing their dues, but BEPZA is now insisting it will take another six months to a year for the sale to be completed and that the factory is in too much debt anyway for the workers to get their full payment.

"We haven't been paid for seven months. They gave most of us Tk 20,000 each before last Eid, and said it would have to last us till the sale goes through. But I owed my landlord rent from January, and I had been buying groceries on credit, so the money was spent within hours. Every day, more and more people are being dismissed from the EPZ factories, many without any benefits. Where and how will I find a job now?"

Workers of 1,175 RMG factories have not received their June wages as of July 19, according to industrial police data, and there are grave uncertainties over whether they will be paid their salaries and bonuses ahead of Eid. The industrial police fear that 790 factories may fail to pay wages and bonuses before Eid. The government has urged the factories to pay festival bonuses by July 27 and half of their current month's salary in advance by July 30, but without any enforcement mechanism on the authorities' part, and no assurances about those who are yet to be paid severance, the workers have no choice but to hope for an Eid miracle: that good sense and humanity prevail at the end of the day.

Let's put our money where our mouth is. Hypocrisy is not a good colour on any one, not least our garment owners.

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How 'kowtow' degenerated into depravity

ATIQR RAHMAN

THE practice of kowtow dates back to the Qin Dynasty, when subjects prostrated in front of emperors to pay their respects. It was also practiced in the courts of *rajas* and *maharajas* in India; the *prajas* had

to prostrate and put up a demeanour of submissiveness to heighten their expression of respect.

It is still in practice in Buddhism today; groups of three prostrate before Buddhist statues and images or tombs of the dead. Hindus also prostrate to pay respect to their deities in temples, and Muslims in the Indian sub-continent bend to touch the feet of the elders to pay respects.

It was only after foreigners from the West visiting China found the practice disdainful that the word "kowtow" came to mean "submissive". European emissaries in the late 18th and 19th centuries often refused to kowtow to the emperor. The former American President and diplomat John Quincy Adams, after carefully studying the records, concluded that the first Opium War (1839-1841) was not about opium at all, it was about kowtow. Lord Macartney, the first British ambassador to China, referred to the ceremonial actions of Chinese officials for kowtow as "tricks of behaviour".

Behind the concept of kowtow was the idea of seeking favour through cringing. One Vedic principle holds that "sacrifice is a gift that compels the deity to make a return—I give so that you may give me." And in Greece, Plato wrote: "Is not sacrifice a gift to God and prayer a request?"

Kowtowing was very subjective. In ancient China, it was viewed as a form of art. How well one prostrates, pays his or her respects, can be subject to interpretation; and therefore, not doing well could be subjected to denial, exclusion and sanctions. One, therefore, had to do better than others to gain favour. Aristocrats in China and elsewhere placed their sons and daughters with wealthier and well-connected families to make them

learn the "tricks of behaviour", and thus help to go up in social status. Kowtow, overtime, came to be measured more objectively; it was not just the physical act of prostrating, but also what came with it. The "art form" of kowtowing mutated from the spiritual form of respect, blessings and submissiveness to the more material forms of incentives, gifts, and favours. It has now come to be defined more by "what material wealth is offered" and what "it brings back (favours

In everyday life of today, the kowtow surrogate—money in exchange for favour—has penetrated deeply into the social fabric of most countries. It is a risky business, but those successful can make huge gains depending on their skills. Its spread is so much in today's developing countries that it can be considered even deadlier than Covid-19!

like deals, businesses)". It thus jumped from the art of paying respect to what anthropologists have long described as the important role that gifts of commodities and money played in everyday life and in religious exchanges.

While words of flattery, hyperboles, the company a person keeps, were still used with success, at others times, it was the offering of material wealth (bribery), which opened the possibility of gaining recognition and prominence. Over time, the latter gained in importance.

The second Opium War would not have been fought if there was successful kowtow. In the more recent days, the

Saddam Husseins, Gaddafis and bin Ladens—despite their dictatorial images, alleged wrong doings, and repressions—could have done better if they kowtowed better to the dominant West and allowed it to access their oil wealth or resources, or submitted to their wish. Similarly, China's Huawei probably did not kowtow well and therefore it faced the wrath of the US, and its Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou got arrested in Canada.

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Most developing countries are afflicted by this surrogate of kowtow. Bangladesh had some serious financial debacles: the Hallmark-Sonali Bank scandal in 2012 (USD 455 million in bad loans), the stock market debacle in 2011 (40 percent decline in two months), the regular swindling of banks for huge loans, and the Bangladesh Bank heist of USD 81 million in 2016. But the most dangerous of these is probably the recent Regent and JKG debacle, in which huge amounts were made illegally, paralleling the recent Theranos scandal (a Silicon Valley start-up) masterminded by Elizabeth Holmes and exposed by *The Wall Street Journal's* John Carreyrou. Details of who paid whom to get favour is not still clear. But there had to be some exchange of favour to protect the criminals involved.

These perverted skills of cosying, trickery, influence and swindling of modern-day kowtow are not the sole preserve of developing countries; developed countries do have many such instances as well: the more famous among them are the kowtowers like Lord Gordon, Charles Ponzi, Soapy Smith and Cassey Chadwick. Stricter oversight and better governance in developed countries make such "illegal ways" of securing influence and getting benefits difficult, but not impossible. One typical example is the recent case of Theranos (mentioned above) which raised multibillion dollars under false promises, and ruthlessly

gagged employees to stop any disclosure. Many of such evildoers escape the justice but when they are caught, they have to pay a heavy price.

In developing countries, with generally poorer governance, the risk of kowtowing can be much less, and therefore kowtowing, big and small, in many spheres of life are quite prevalent. If one does have the art of kowtowing and can do it with finesse, why a person should not, especially if there is a low risk of being caught? And in the case of getting caught, there could be people of influence who would be ready to defend them and help them shrug their responsibilities.

People of book and knowledge and with high morality are therefore at a disadvantage vis-à-vis these kowtowers. One may have high skills and high morality, but they may find the entry into the inner circle of influentials difficult. On the other hand, the kowtowers, armed with the skills of swindling, may glide past all the barriers with ease. In such circumstances, the inevitable happens. The bad drives the good out.

It is extremely difficult to stop kowtowing. It comes in the guise of civility, ride on false or dazzling promises, "positive" approach, innovativeness, charity, "free social service", etc. It can start benignly, from "yes sir, can do it", to gradually capturing critical public services, such as public health on which lives of ordinary citizens depend. The recent Regent/JKG incidents in Bangladesh are examples of such vicious conniving motives of making money by putting peoples' lives in danger.

It is not difficult to stop this. Simple and transparent guidelines, active oversight, zero tolerance for such crimes, strong intentions to bring the culprits to justice, and dispensing justice quickly are important for ending such social malaise. More important, however, is the protection of the whistleblowers and journalists who can expose such wrongdoing without fear or favour, as in the case of *The Wall Street Journal* journalist John Carreyrou, who exposed Theranos.

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