

Pandemic and the state of cancer care in Bangladesh

In conversation with Mohammad Faizur Rahman, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, United Hospital Ltd.

Ten months have passed since COVID-19 was detected in Bangladesh. What challenges have you faced at United Hospital and how have you addressed the needs of your patients, especially cancer patients?

We were plagued with uncertainty when COVID-19 was first detected in Bangladesh. At United Hospital, we were still able to grasp onto things and respond quickly. Starting from ensuring the supply chain and resource mobilisation to educating ourselves and organising a central committee, everything was done to ensure the total safety and care of patients. We really wanted to ensure overall knowledge enhancement through engagement with international bodies such as United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and World Health Organization (WHO).

Cancer patients already have a compromised immune system due to nature of the disease and also because of the side effects of the treatments. So, we took it upon ourselves to prioritise raising awareness among them. In the past ten months, we have performed almost 20,000 radiation therapies, around 800 positron emission tomography-computed tomography (PET-CT) scans, 5,500 oncology consultations, and nearly 500 oncology patients were reached through telemedicine.

In the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis, was there hesitation and/or fear among cancer patients or their caregivers? How did you address their concerns?

From quite early on, we had two completely segregated zones for COVID-19 patients and non-COVID-19 patients. The sixth and seventh floors were converted to negative pressure zones. All of that was achieved in only a few weeks, at an expense of several million dollars. Many of our patients who usually go abroad to seek treatment, had to come to us due to travel bans. We made sure that they were provided with the level of service they would expect overseas.

In our country, the casualty rate among caregivers was higher in the



early days of COVID-19. Thus there was some justifiable apprehension. Since we have been maintaining separate units at our hospital, it felt like we were running two parallel hospitals. Our senior consultants kept themselves updated and helped the central committee organise various programmes. Our hospital management was also significantly productive.

We ensured that our caregivers were given treatment free-of-cost. Wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) and working long hours must have been difficult for our doctors and nurses. However, they duly carried out

their duties and I thank all of them for their service. We ensured that our caregivers were compensated in a timely manner, despite the financial crunch.

Do you think that the fear of COVID-19 has delayed cancer diagnosis and treatment? How would you address the pandemic going forward?

Unlike other patients who could delay their elective treatment, diagnosed cancer patients could not opt to do the same. We had to ensure that cancer patients not infected with COVID-19 were tended to in an entirely different

zone due to their compromised immunity.

When it comes to cancer patients who were not diagnosed, it is very likely that the diagnosis may have been delayed due to the fear of catching COVID-19 at hospitals. Being under proper screening and adaptation of preventive measures usually ensure diagnosis of cancer at earlier stages.

We had a two-time cancer survivor recover from COVID-19 at the age of 80. We took every step necessary to ensure the wellbeing of our patients.

Has there been any recent upgrade to cancer care therapy in your hospital that you would like to mention?

We are a tertiary care hospital, and our cancer centre is of the utmost priority. In Bangladesh, cancer is mainly diagnosed through histopathology. However, for appropriate diagnosis, PET-CT scan is necessary. Our ingredient for PET-CT, fluorodeoxyglucose (FDG), is produced by the cyclotron machine. This machine is only available here at United Hospital in Bangladesh. Installed back in 2011, almost 100 crore taka was invested into this. Each equipment and machine required for PET-CT scan and radiotherapy costs 14 to 17 crore taka for maintenance every year. Even this year, we invested an additional half a million dollars to ensure proper planning, recording, and storing of the data of all the services provided to our patients.

Cancer treatment is very specialised and protocol-based. A cancer patient requires mental healthcare as well. For World Cancer Day this year, our message is "Cancer screening and awareness; let it start from the family."

Tell us about United Hospital's plans and goals for the near and distant future.

United Group is highly committed to healthcare. In the next three years, three more hospitals will be run by the United Group, which will equate to 1,700 available beds. For our medical college in Madani Avenue, we are constructing a 500-bed hospital. We will also build a 100-seat medical college and 500-bed hospital in Chattogram. The former

will be the first project under Public Private Partnership (PPP) Authority in Bangladesh, in the healthcare sector. We are constructing a 200-bed hospital in Jamalpur, our Chairman's home district. United Trust is funding this hospital and it will be run through cross subsidisation.

When it comes to plans for the distant future, we want to be the best hospital, and not in terms of profitability or revenue. We want the same service to be provided to our patients that we would provide for our immediate families consistently. Our country is populous and mass-treating patients in hospitals is not a feasible solution to our collective health problems. We want to raise awareness and advise people to lead a healthier lifestyle. Despite all this, if medical attention is still needed, we will ensure the support required.

In a way, COVID-19 has been a blessing in disguise because it has highlighted our shortcomings. The pace at which the physicians caught up despite COVID-19 gives us hope that a developed healthcare system is possible in the country.

Do you have any message for cancer patients and oncology professionals of the country on World Cancer Day?

In most cases, the cancer patients who had higher comorbidity could not survive COVID-19. Thus, cancer patients and their families cannot compromise their hygiene. I would also urge them to remain hopeful, happy, and always under proper treatment. A cancer patient is the best teacher for ten other cancer patients. We regularly organise programmes with cancer patients and the strength they exude blows our minds. Thus, I really hope they take on this responsibility willingly.

I am not oncology professional, but I humbly believe that we need to be united in our efforts to develop the sector. We need to prepare good clinicians and technologists and expand our institutes to meet the needs of our patients.

The interview was taken by Aysha Zaheer of The Daily Star.

"I don't want to die before my time comes – I want to live my life fully"

Firoza Afroj Subarna, 43, a homemaker in Dhaka, had no idea her world would be upturned at the end of 2013 when her seemingly healthy body began to show signs of something sinister. One of the most common urinary tract cancer symptoms is blood in the urine, which led to Firoza's diagnosis of transitional cell carcinoma (TCC) in her kidney. Her family was left devastated. Her daughters had difficulties adjusting to this new reality while her husband, Md. Mokhlusur Rahman, struggled to balance being her primary caretaker while also maintaining his job.



Firoza's story is one of overcoming many adversities. In 2014, she had her right kidney removed in an effort to contain the TCC, an aggressive cancer that spreads rapidly across the body. However, in 2015, the cancer attacked her lungs and her bones. Doctors tried to keep her condition stable through chemotherapy and radiotherapy. While these treatments are known to be painful and invasive, Firoza remained optimistic: "I was only in pain during the chemo and radiotherapy; the rest of the time I felt completely healthy and led a normal life." In 2016, a liver cyst appeared, and after careful observation, doctors decided to operate. Traces of cancer were still left behind, so doctors opted for oral chemotherapy.

While seeking treatment in India in 2018, Firoza's doctor suggested a treatment a bit different than chemotherapy, named immunotherapy. Firoza was initially apprehensive of the suggestion since spending four lakh taka monthly on immunotherapy was not feasible for her family. But she soon bit the bullet and began the therapy, and she hasn't regretted it since. "I know how daunting and expensive immunotherapy can be, especially for people from the middle-class or lower, but I couldn't recommend it more," shares Firoza. She has been receiving the treatment from United Hospital from 2018 till present. Firoza and her husband's only demand is that the governments reduce cancer drug costs and make it more accessible.

Even after almost eight years of fighting cancer, Firoza has never once given up. "I used to be in constant fear of my life suddenly ending. The emotional turmoil was immense, both on me and my family. My willpower soon began to get stronger, and I realised that I don't want to die before my time comes – I want to live my life fully. And that is exactly what I'm doing now."

Interviewed and written by Mayabe Aramya of The Daily Star.

Grit and determination are enough to win over cancer

Right before M R Chowdhury found out about his cancer, he had smoked ten cigarettes in a row. Those ten were his last.

Former businessman M R Chowdhury has shown tremendous spirit and determination in his battle against cancer. He recalled that the first time he was diagnosed with lung cancer back in May of 2016, he shed no tears and simply made the necessary phone calls. He attributed a part of his firm resolve to his experiences with cancer patients at home. "My mother and all three of my sisters were diagnosed with cancer. My mother and one of my sisters have already passed away, but I refuse to think that they lost." He mused and further added, "My cancer cannot be completely genetic; it must have been a result of my incessant smoking."

In August of 2016, his first operation had taken place in Singapore, after which he was declared cancer-free. However, in August of 2017, during his second postoperative visitation with the oncologist, he was told he had relapsed, the cancer having spread beyond lungs. Apart from radiotherapy and chemotherapy, he has received immunotherapy in India and in Bangladesh. He is now under treatment at United Hospital, where he claims he has received the best service so far. However, in March of 2020, he relapsed for the second time and underwent radiation therapy. In December, he relapsed again, his cancer having spread to the bones. "I was told after my third relapse that I was done for. I replied, 'You're not God!'"

Even at the age of 68, Mr Chowdhury lives his life with fortitude and hope. "In the past five or so years I've spent with cancer in my body, I did not feel entirely hopeless for even a moment. When asked if his family has been supportive in his journey, he said, "Cancer causes extreme pain and discomfort, but you're not the only one who has to tolerate it, your family has to as well." He added that his wife has been extremely understanding and supportive, whilst two of his three children are here with him to show solidarity.

When asked if he has any message for other cancer patients, he said, "Death is inevitable, with or without cancer. One cannot think that they are going to die the moment they receive their diagnosis. There's treatment and with enough determination, cancer can be won over." Mr Chowdhury's grit is an inspiration to everyone.

Interviewed and written by Aysha Zaheer of The Daily Star.



No compromise on happiness

"My spirits have not been broken the slightest. I was only briefly scared and confused in the first 24 hours of receiving the news," says 53-year-old Sabina Kabir while recalling the moment when she was first diagnosed with cancer.

For the past one and a half years, she had been experiencing heavy and irregular bleeding but none of the gynaecologists she visited were able to identify her condition. On October 22, 2020, her situation rapidly aggravated. "I tried to make appointments with multiple doctors but no appointments were available for the next two to three weeks. Due to the pandemic, the doctors were also opting for virtual treatment. But, I knew virtual treatment would not help me," shares Sabina. This is when she was suggested to go to United Hospital where she underwent dilation and curettage (D&C) test which is a procedure to remove tissues from inside the uterus to cure conditions of heavy bleeding. The biopsy results of the test revealed that she had stage one endometrial cancer.

"I could not be happier about the diagnosis. What if the cancer had progressed to stage four before the doctors could identify it?" mentions Sabina gratefully. Her positive outlook is further reinforced by the unwavering support of her friends and family. She recounts her friends donating blood for her and constantly checking up on her. There was never a moment where she felt hopeless and continuous support was pouring in from everywhere.

Dealing with cancer in the middle of a pandemic is even more challenging but Sabina was not scared to visit the hospital for her treatment. Neither was she scared of undergoing intensive treatment. "I was laughing in the chemotherapy room chatting with the nurses and the patient in the bed next to me had to draw the curtains and take a look at me because nobody ever laughs in the chemotherapy room," narrates Sabina amusingly.

Sabina's story is one of positivity and strength. Although the regular treatments and therapies have caused gradual weight loss and has made her weaker, she has not let it stop her from enjoying life. She even celebrated the start of this new year right after undergoing a huge operation. She is determined to keep on fighting and has no intent on compromising her happiness.

Interviewed and written by Tasnim Odrika of The Daily Star.

