

#HEALTH & FITNESS

The untapped potential of the healthcare industry of Bangladesh

For several decades, the healthcare service sector of Bangladesh has not received proper respect by many, as it should have. However, upon closer inspection, one would agree that this sector has made meteoric progress over the past few years. Among the many deleterious effects the current pandemic has caused upon the entire economy, it also gave the healthcare industry a scope to prove its potential.



In regards to this, Dr Shagufa Anwar, Director of Communication and Business Development at United Hospital Limited, shares her opinions and experience. With 22 years of specialising in health administration, communication, and brand marketing, Dr Shagufa has witnessed the transformation of this sector.

According to you, what is the current status of our healthcare sector? Undeniably, the pharmaceutical industry has taken itself to an international level with profound support from relevant bodies, but the same cannot be said for the service counterpart of this very industry. Albeit Bangladesh is celebrating 50 years of

independence, the journey of a structured professional hospital system dates back to only 15-16 years. Fortunately, against all odds, our country's private hospital sector, built so far on individual entrepreneurship, is now taking wide strides of development. It is getting evolved into a structured and automated environment that is proving to be good enough to compete with global standards. However, we could have done far better if we had the attention we deserved.

How far-reaching do you think is its potential? Healthcare service industry is one sector, where there is no dearth of demand in the

market. So, patients seeking right treatment and care are available, we would just need to package the product rightly at the right price for the right target audience. There lies a cascade of opportunities within this single industry, including flourishing other industries starting with, per se, tourism. Bangladesh's healthcare provision contains excellence coupled with affordability that can be leveraged to attract foreign patients from neighbouring countries. It is absolutely doable with support from relevant government bodies.

Furthermore, propagation of the healthcare sector will also give rise to adjunct supplier industries to meet the increased demand of medical tools, equipment and safety gears. Additionally, it will create more jobs as more skilled manpower will be required to serve its own needs, spanning from medical professionals to lab technicians.

Thus, I believe the healthcare sector of Bangladesh has the potential to become the next major contributor of our economy. We need to look at the bigger picture and bring all the essential fundamentals on the drawing board, to plan the steps and roll out each on a time bound manner and now is the right time to implement this.

What role do patients play in this process of proliferation?

Patients play a crucial participatory role adding synergy to the service delivery, as customer feedback is crucial for development of any service sector. Other than pointing out flaws, we would also expect our patients to constructively criticise to enable us to correct and minimise our limitations. They should also share their positive experiences with others in order to build a relationship of trust and reliability, which is crucial for the respectful facelift of this industry.

We usually find people sharing any small or big service satisfaction they receive in hospitals abroad, loud and clear in many forums. But any bad experience which one faces there is rather not mentioned or gets justified by the victim himself citing some excuses. This is rather a tragedy, that we do not trust and promote our own doctors, own nurses, own hospitals and we feel some doctor, nurse or hospital in another country who is a stranger to us, cares more for us than our own people.

What is the overall impact the pandemic has brought about?

The silver lining of the pandemic was the much-needed attention it has brought towards this sector. We all know the healthcare providers of our country have valiantly fought during the pandemic and are continuing to do so with their knowledge and capacity, which has earned respect for us from people of all genre, locally and also globally.

In the pandemic, owing to travel bans, patients who would usually go abroad for treatment, were compelled to seek our services, and were pleasantly surprised to learn that our hospitals match their international expectations. This is definitely not a complete turnaround, but it is indeed a herald towards altering the pessimistic consumer attitude.

How do you envisage the future of this sector and what is the way forward?

I envision Bangladesh's healthcare sector to be one of the top contributors to our country's economy as this can also be the medical tourism hub of South Asia in the next few years. Compared to our neighbouring countries, our treatment standard at the private sector in many clinical specialities is at par, coupled with reduced costs and compassionate service. This will act as a game changer for the economy of Bangladesh. However, to reach this goal we need to work collectively.

**By Fariha Amber
Photo: Sk Enamul Haq**