

WORLD HEALTH DAY 2021

Government must have a clear vision to ensure better healthcare

Professor Muzaherul Huq, former adviser, South-East Asia region, World Health Organization (WHO), and founder, Public Health Foundation of Bangladesh, talks to Eresh Omar Jamal of The Daily Star about improving Bangladesh's healthcare services and overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic

For this year's World Health Day, the World Health Organization wanted to highlight the importance of building a fairer and healthier world. In terms of fairness, how do you rate our healthcare system? And when it comes to ensuring a healthy population, how would you rate its performance?

What is important for Bangladesh's healthcare sector is to ensure that everyone has access to quality healthcare. That has to be the ultimate goal. If we look at our healthcare infrastructure, we can say that it is quite good in terms of how the system is designed—at the national level we have tertiary specialised hospitals, at district level there are district hospitals, at upazila level there are upazila hospitals and below upazila level there are union health centres and union sub-centres, and so on. The problem is that we are not using this infrastructure correctly, which is why patient satisfaction in most cases is very low.

Our healthcare sector currently has very centralised control. That means that even the clinics at the union level are controlled from the national level and they have no autonomy of their own. Because of that, hospitals starting from the union level all the way down are not being properly monitored or supervised. The staff working in these hospitals are not given the proper training and so the people are reluctant to receive treatment there. Even at the upazila level, people are reluctant to get treatment because there is a shortage of doctors, equipment and support staff who are trained to use the equipment properly, which is causing the upazila hospitals to provide healthcare that is unsatisfactory.

The shortage of personnel and equipment often occur because of trivial reasons. For

example, we might see an ambulance not being in service because its tyre is punctured. This could easily be fixed. But the problem is that even small decisions like this oftentimes cannot be taken by the authorities at the lower levels. That is why our healthcare system has to be decentralised. This will give the healthcare authorities at different stages some form of decision-making control. At the same time, there has to be some monitoring and supervisory mechanisms in place to ensure that they are taking appropriate and timely decisions.

Then comes the issue of budget. Bangladesh's healthcare budget is the lowest in the region, and even there we have corruption and pilferage reducing it further. And the health ministry doesn't seem to have the capacity to properly utilise whatever little funds are available. The allocation for the healthcare sector has to be increased and the utilisation of the funds has to get better.

In Bangladesh, we have seen private healthcare grow alongside public healthcare. But there has to be some parity between the two. That is absent. Out-of-pocket expenditure for healthcare is one of the highest in the world. That has to be reduced—and the WHO has been asking the government to bring it down to 30 percent for almost a decade now, without much success. The state has to make healthcare affordable for all, that is its constitutional obligation.

Finally, we don't have an effective reference system. If someone goes to a community clinic and then has to go to a union sub centre, there is no way of referring them from one to the other. If we want to ensure universal healthcare, the first thing we have to do is establish an effective reference system, so that an ordinary villager can be referred to institutions at the tertiary or other levels,



Professor Muzaherul Huq. PHOTO: STAR

should they require that kind of medical attention, and then get referred back for followups at their original location.

A lot of criticisms were directed towards the health sector and related policymakers during the initial days of the Covid-19 outbreak. Do you believe that the authorities and the hospitals have done enough to address those problems and are now better positioned to face what seems like a much stronger-than-expected new wave of the virus?

When the virus first came to Bangladesh, we weren't prepared at all. Our way of addressing it was to react to the virus, so we were always a step behind. One thing we have going for us now is that the number of RT-PCR machines in the country has increased.

When the virus first started spreading, the

WHO warned everyone about it and many countries took precautionary measures. Bangladesh, on the other hand, didn't take the WHO's warning very seriously, which is why we had only one RT-PCR machine to begin with. Still, our casualty number wasn't as high as other countries that were better prepared.

Now that a new wave of the virus has arrived, I must say again that we did not really prepare for it, even though we had seen how a second and even a third wave had hit other countries. That is why the death toll and the number of newly infected are increasing daily. Why didn't we prepare for this new wave? That is a political matter and is for the state to answer.

Another factor in addressing the virus is to create awareness. The government has done a brilliant job of making the people aware of many things. Everyone knows that you should wash your hands regularly, wear masks and maintain social distancing to avoid catching the virus. But the problem is, the government never really involved the people when it came to enforcing the health guidelines, and is still not trying. This too was a matter of preparation. How can you defeat this virus without involving the people? You can't! It's not possible for any country, and Bangladesh is no exception.

Where must our focus be, going forwards, in regards to the healthcare sector—should it be on vaccinating the population, ensuring some form of universal healthcare, or something else?

The government can have many priorities when it comes to the health sector. But there are times when it must prioritise some of its priorities more than others. Right now, no matter how many things the government has

to focus on, its number one priority must be to reduce the spread of the virus. If we cannot reduce the spread soon, many lives will be lost. And I think it should be the government's number one priority, and also the only priority for now.

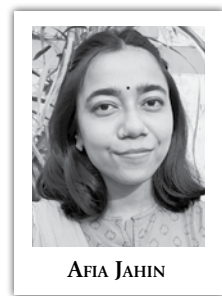
So how do we contain the virus? There are some ways that it can be done, and others have done it.

First, the health guidelines have to be followed by everyone. And for that the government must involve the people so that they can automatically do what is required of them. Second, we have to vaccinate 12 crore people, there is no alternative to that, because we have to reach herd immunity. So, the government must encourage the people to get themselves vaccinated as soon as possible.

Now the question can be asked, is the government going down the right path and guiding the people to go along? I would say no. The government has declared that we will have seven days of lockdown. But lockdowns have certain characteristics. When we are leaving the *Boi Mela* open and allowing private vehicles to operate normally, we are not really in a state of lockdown. Instead, we seem to be in a state of confusion, and what exactly we are trying to do is unclear.

Lockdown means everything should be closed except for emergency services. And people should stay at home no matter what. Most people right now don't even know where they can go and where they should not. The government must have a clear vision of what it wants and also prepare the necessary strategy to achieve that. There is no reason nor room for policymakers to be confused and indecisive about what to do at this stage.

'Second wave of the pandemic' woes, etcetera



AFIA JAHIN

THE second April of the pandemic is here, and it seems we are back to square one. Just as most institutions were planning to reopen (all of them intending to exercise proper health guidelines, one hopes) after having lost a year to the

Covid-19 pandemic, daily infection rates and fatalities are rising exponentially, with April 6 seeing 7,213 cases and 66 deaths, the highest for Bangladesh in a day—ever.

Over the course of writing this piece, I have had to revise those figures five times. And, for once, that has little to do with how much I procrastinate on writing and everything to do with how quickly the situation is hitting new lows every day.

The government initially issued 18 directives for the public in order to contain and combat the virus until at least April 12. Of course, now we are near the middle of a weeklong "lockdown" (until noon of April 11), with a new set of 11 directives, just dipping our toes back into the familiar waters of April past.

With that, it seems it is time again for us to brush up on our pandemic manners, as if we are blind to the constant reminders of it that are present in our homes and outside.

There is no denying that the nation is, at present, collectively in its worst state so far in terms of the coronavirus pandemic. It is not just a case of "more people being tested equals more positive cases"—because we all participated in bringing about this second wave of the pandemic. Offices reopened, most not in limited capacities and many in full swing. Weddings consisting of two to four ceremonies took place (amateurishly

choreographed dances and all), coffee and dinner dates happened, and we all indulged in much-needed *adda's* with our friends and family. It would be the height of hypocrisy for any of us, including authorities, to now act shocked and dismayed at the ongoing Covid-19 surge.

Sure, the vaccines got here on time. But were they being properly distributed amongst the public? In order to register for the vaccine, one had to go to the website surokkha.gov.bd and use his/her/their National Identification (NID) card number to complete the registration. This is grossly exclusionary to the majority of the population, for whom accessing a website and filling out details is not a process which only takes a few minutes. Having one's NID card be the only form of verification, too, is problematic, given how many people do not even have their NID cards or have lost them. It is also a bit curious that the registration process for the vaccine was made even remotely complicated, amid a crisis as deadly as the coronavirus pandemic. And why was it so? To establish how forward we are in terms of our technological prowess? Is that our priority at this time, instead of inoculating as much of the population as quickly as possible?

The medium-scale implementation of the vaccine drive and the public's lack of interest towards it should have meant that we would still practice all of the general safety measures—maintaining social distancing, going out only when necessary, etc. After all, no matter how strictly the government enforces its directives, keeping safe from this particular virus is also the responsibility of each individual member of the public. But instead, we let loose gradually, until it seemed life was back to the old normal—only now we wear masks, sometimes. As if the "no mask, no service" signs at every establishment (large, medium, or small) and



Ironically, health and safety guidelines are not being followed even when buying and selling face masks. PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

the PSA before the first outgoing call of each new day have already become words which hold no meaning. As if the rising numbers of Covid-19 infections and related deaths are also mere numbers now, instead of each digit representing human lives affected or lost. As if doing the bare minimum of wearing a mask properly in public and maintaining good hygiene, too, are too much to ask for from us. That seems to be how far gone we are in terms of losing empathy for others in our fast-paced and "digital" nation.

Back when things were only beginning to worsen (when was that, a week or a month ago now?), I had planned on writing mightily about how we should be careful and thoughtful when we are raising awareness

about the virus. That we should measure out equal parts sympathy and sternness into our words when asking someone to "please, wear your mask" and "distance socially" and "wash your hands" and "do you really need to go to your friend's cousin's wedding?" In any case, do not stigmatise the virus: that was to be my message. But maybe doing just that is what got us here, now that I think about it.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there is evidence that stigma due to the virus leads to people not seeking medical attention for their symptoms and not following public health directives as adamantly. So, of course, when someone coughs near you, it would be inconsiderate of you to give them the stink-eye, as that is not

helpful and might also make them feel like a pariah of some sort. And if that person is someone you know, then your reaction might give them the idea that you are not a safe person for them to reveal their symptoms to or ask for help from if they are in fact ill.

But what about those of us who do not practise safety out of sheer arrogance? Sure, perhaps only a higher power can dictate whether or not you catch the viral infection, no matter how safe you keep yourself. But that's the thing: how can you be sure that such a higher power will *not* "decide" to give you the infection? Is that not arrogance—rather than faith—to knowingly put one's own and others' health at risk (by not following basic Covid-19 health guidelines), when not doing so is very easily avoidable?

Then there are others (like myself), who are neither arrogant, nor ignorant—but simply chose to turn a blind eye to the dangers of socialising during the last few months (when the infection rate had taken a dip). Safety measures were only practised whenever enforced or at one's own whim, as if these measures were optional and not moral obligations of each citizen.

"So, what can we do now?" is a question I can pose here for dramatic effect alone, because we all (those who have the means of reading this) already know what to do. As with anything in our particular society, it seems, only something drastic happening can wake us from our self-imposed stupor of ignorance and make us start acting the way we should have been acting all along. Perhaps this second wave of Covid-19, worse every day than the one before it, will push us to be more vigilant regarding the safety of everyone around us (loved ones and strangers alike) so we can move past it to a better normal—not just a new one.

Afia Jahin is a member of the Editorial Team at The Daily Star.

QUOTABLE Quote section featuring a portrait of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and his famous quote: "One always has time enough if one will apply it well."

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH section containing a crossword puzzle grid and a list of clues for across and down words.

MONDAY'S ANSWERS section providing the solutions for the crossword puzzle.

BEETLE BAILEY and BABY BLUES comic strips by Mort Walker and Kirkman & Scott.