

Who will hold the reins of private hospitals?

Hospitals are making obscene profits in Covid-19 treatment

IT is common knowledge that the cost of Covid-19 treatment is much higher in private hospitals than in public ones, like all treatments basically. But how much higher, we didn't know. We do now thanks to a study conducted by the Health Economics Unit of the health ministry, and the revelation is quite startling. While the government spends an average of Tk 1.28 lakh for the treatment of a Covid-19 patient in general beds and Tk 4.08 lakh for those treated in intensive care units (ICU), in case of private hospitals, the average cost is much, much higher—around Tk 2.42 lakh in general beds and around Tk 5.09 lakh in ICU beds. Treatment of Covid-19 patients is free in government hospitals, barring the expenses of diagnostic tests and medicine. But the costs in private hospitals are completely borne by the patients. The inequality between the two groups of treatment-seekers couldn't be more pronounced.

The major differences were found in diagnosis and medicine costs which, according to experts, were due to private hospitals not following the national Covid-19 treatment protocol. They are charging abnormally high fees for these services, emboldened by the total lack of scrutiny by the relevant authorities. Just think, the diagnosis cost alone was 17.7 percent of the total expenses in private hospitals, over seven times higher than the diagnosis cost in public hospitals, as the study revealed. The fact that these hospitals can charge whatever they please and get away with it, no matter what the consequence, speaks volumes about the sorry state of private-sector healthcare in Bangladesh. This is not just an ethical issue. It's a crime against the people, when they are at their most vulnerable. This is what happens when corporate profit becomes the underlying impetus of the treatment campaign. Short of a functional central oversight mechanism, ordinary patients are fair game in such an environment.

The question is: whose responsibility is it to ensure the private sector doesn't corporatise Covid-19 treatment? Clearly, with the limited number of public hospitals, it's the private sector that has to bear the burden of treatment for the majority of the patients. It will be unfair to say they are totally failing at that job. But the obscene profits that most private hospitals are making at the expense of patients, without any oversight from the government, run contrary to the spirit of humanity shown by certain members of the private sector, most recently by Gonoshasthaya Kendra. The GK's recent initiative to "bring hospital at the doorsteps of patients"—by dispatching mobile medical teams in different patients of the capital and providing diagnostic services and treatment at subsidised rates—is an example of what the private sector, and its public counterpart, can do to serve the nation at this hour of crisis. That the opposite is happening is mostly a failure of the health authorities. The government must discipline the private sector and ensure no one can exploit the patients by overcharging. The national Covid-19 treatment protocol must be enforced without any exception.

Woes of the migrant workers

The government should provide for their subsistence

ONE of the sectors hit hardest by the pandemic is the migrant workers' sector. Every country has been affected by the pandemic fallout, in greater or lesser degree. Since the onset of the pandemic in early 2020 a great majority of our expatriate workers had to return home. Unfortunately, many of them returned with very little cash in hand. As it is, the record shows that Bangladeshi workers invariably get the raw deal. Their pay remains in arrears in many cases, and since they had to return home in a hurry, they had no opportunity to claim their dues. Most of the returnees are from the Middle East.

It is not surprising that the expatriate workers would find themselves without employment at home too. The pandemic-compelled lockdown have caused job opportunities to shrink, adding to the number of unemployed and pushing more people below the poverty line. It is therefore not surprising that 47.23 percent of returnee migrants find themselves without any ostensible means of income now. This is according to a survey by Brac Migration Programme of 417 expatriate workers who returned home last year. The survey was conducted in March-April 2021 to assess their state a year after their return. Of these returnees only 35 percent have been able to set up small business. The others are doing odd jobs. A redeeming feature is that the situation now is somewhat better than last year when a similar survey by Brac found 87 percent of 558 returnee migrants did not have income opportunities.

Being without regular income and without guarantee of reemployment in their jobs abroad it is not surprising that they would be under tremendous mental duress. We believe that the administration, led by the ministry of expatriate welfare, should initiate a plan to provide support to the returnees. Loans on easy terms should be provided to them for the time being. Alongside this, the ministry should take up the matter with respective countries so that the expatriate workers could return to their jobs without going through fresh paper work once the situation improved. We should not forget that the 45-billion-dollar foreign exchange reserve we are boasting of today are due mostly to our expatriate workers and we have a moral obligation to take care of them during these hard times. Losing their jobs means losing our source of foreign exchange too.

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

SINCE the beginning of the pandemic, educational institutions have been closed in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus. Face-to-face education had been stopped at schools, colleges and universities. Around 188 countries have suspended face-to-face education during the pandemic. Hence, countries which were already facing crisis in the area of education could now potentially face a catastrophe.

In Bangladesh, about 40 million students have been affected due to the closer of the educational institutions in view of the pandemic. Schools have been closed since March 2020. Only a handful of educational institutions are imparting education through online platforms while most are closed and their students are sitting idle at home with tremendous mental agony. There are no online teaching and learning facilities in most parts of the country. Villages, sub-urban areas and remote places are not covered by quality internet services. Students from poor families do not have access to computers, smart phones and internet. Parents of most students do not have the skills to teach their children at home. Children of poor families are particularly in difficult situations as these families are also going through livelihood crisis. Boys are asked to search for and get engaged in income earning activities for their families. Girls are being married off as they are considered burden for their families. Early marriage and early child bearing will potentially risk the health of both mothers and children. Therefore, several achievements made over the decades are apprehended to be reversed due to the pandemic. Not only the inequality of learning is going to accentuate, but inequality in terms of health and nutritional status and economic opportunities will be visible much more than before.

Even the children who are receiving online lessons face several problems. Though the education sector has observed some digitisation through television, internet, and radio learning during the last few years, students are not fully used to this yet. Teachers also did not have experience of online teaching. Teaching materials for online classes were not developed. Hence the quality of education is lower than face-to-face education.

Since the pandemic is primarily a

health threat which has also hit the economy hard, the attention of the policymakers has been mainly on controlling the virus and keeping the wheels of the economy turning. Sending children home was part of the health and safety measures for the students. In doing so, the medium to longer term issues have remained out of sight. Meeting up the learning needs of students during the pandemic is one such issue which has long term implications for the country.

for smooth implementation of health protocols at schools.

Second, the education approach will have to be different than the pre-pandemic period given the emerging situation. We need to bear in mind that we will not be able to regain what has been lost just by opening the schools and colleges and taking exams in the physical classrooms. It is likely that during these last several months since March 2020 there has been a decline in core

and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The organisation suggests allocating 4-6 percent of GDP for education in its Education 2030 Framework for Action. Given that the loss in learning is huge, the budget allocation for education will have to be doubled what the government usually allocates. That is, in the coming budget for FY 2021-22, the government should allocate four percent of GDP for the education sector.

Fourth, higher allocation in the budget is of course, not the only remedial for restoring the education losses due to the pandemic. The education ministry has to know how to spend the allocated resources efficiently. Sadly, the allocated resource remains unutilised and the budget allocation for most sectors, including the education sector has to be revised downwards due to low spending. More often than not, there is more interest in physical infrastructure and less on soft infrastructure. Hence, recruitment of adequate number of school teachers and training are less prioritised by the authorities. As a result, teacher-student ratio in schools and colleges is high, and the quality of education is less than satisfactory.

Finally, the pandemic has intensified the already existing challenges in accessing quality education in the country. Though the school enrolment has been increasing, the quality of education has not. There seems to be a lack of realisation that investment in human capital is key to economic development. Countries which have skilled human resources have progressed more than which do not. Skilled people have more opportunities in the labour-market, and they are more productive and economically better off than those who are not. As Bangladesh is on its journey of graduation from the least developed country group by 2026, human capital will play a critical role in its smooth journey.

While the pandemic has brought in much distress in all aspects of our lives, this can be considered as a turning point to prepare our education system for facing any future interruptions and crisis. This is an opportunity to enhance the digitalisation of the education system and access to technology so that students and teachers get equipped for both in-person classroom and remote learning methods. This is also an opportunity for building a stronger education system which is based on quality, inclusivity and equity.

Let us not waste a good crisis!

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In Bangladesh, about 40 million students have been affected due to the closer of the educational institutions in view of the pandemic.

PHOTO: RASHED SUMON

In view of the damage caused by the pandemic, the whole outlook and approach towards the learning loss have to be changed. The depth of the seriousness has to be recognised first. There have been discussions on opening the schools for some time now. The second wave of the pandemic has once again discouraged and delayed the decision. One also does not know when the pandemic will be gone. But everyone expects that once the wrath of the pandemic slows down, educational institutions will have to be opened up. Children are also eagerly waiting to go to schools and colleges.

Once such a decision is taken, adequate preparation has to be taken by all institutions and concerned administration. First and foremost is to strengthen the capacity of schools and colleges to maintain health and safety protocols. Facilities for rapid testing, tracing, masks, and sanitisation will have to be maintained. There is a need for coordination among the education and health officials at the field levels who can guide teachers and students. Community level health workers can also be involved

competency of students. As it is, despite progress in a number of educational indicators over the past years, the quality of education has not improved much. Particularly, poor performance in mathematics, science and English even after secondary and higher secondary level education is very disappointing. Therefore, education experts have suggested that once the schools are opened, students need not study all subjects in the first year. They should rather focus on a few core subjects such as Bangla, English, mathematics and science during this one year so that the students have a stronger foundation before going back to their full curriculum.

Third, adequate resources will be required for implementing the above measures. Unfortunately, the budget for the education sector is stagnant around two percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the last few years. Education sector received only 2.09 percent of GDP and 11.7 percent of total budget in the national budget for fiscal year (FY) 2020-21. The allocation is much less than what is suggested by the United Nations Educational, Scientific

Bangladesh apparel industry: It's time to shift perceptions

RMG NOTES



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

FOR better or worse, Bangladesh as a sourcing hub has become the global bellwether for CSR issues in apparel supply chains. More often than not Bangladesh is portrayed as a case study on poor working conditions. If international media wants to highlight safety, Bangladesh is their favourite punching bag. And, of course, for pollution, water wastage and so on, the spotlight is always put on Bangladesh.

I got thinking about a lot of these issues in recent weeks in the run up to the anniversary of the Rana Plaza tragedy. No surprise, the spotlight has been on Bangladesh once again, and I have seen many international commentators making all sorts of circumspceptions or throwing their views on the country. If one were to read everything they say, it is likely they would never purchase another garment from here.

So, I began to wonder, how many people who criticise Bangladesh have first-hand knowledge of this issue? I know for certain that many of our most ardent critics have never stepped foot on Bangladeshi soil! Often, I read about Bangladesh and our factories and I see an industry I simply do not recognise! This picture I see too often is the Bangladesh of a decade ago.

Let me be clear: Rana Plaza is an event we should never forget and, of course, we need to remember those who lost their lives in the most tragic incident every year. The terrible incident that will be forever etched in the history of Bangladesh's apparel industry. The country and the world were shocked, pained and saddened with grief and mourning for the tragic loss of human lives.

But I think it is also important to promote the fact that we have had several years during which the Bangladesh Accord and Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety supported a huge overhaul of the Bangladesh apparel factories.

Major remediation works were carried out costing tens of millions of US dollars, alongside the rolling out of key safety features across the industry. In a recent survey conducted by QIMA and Just Style, Bangladesh ranked second in "Ethical Manufacturing" with a score of 7.7 only behind Taiwan which scored 8.0. Vietnam came in third, followed by Thailand, Pakistan, Turkey, China, India and Brazil, respectively.

Bangladesh successfully eliminated child labour from its apparel industry with the help of the ILO. The workers' wages have steadily risen and their rights have also increased, although we must all keep fighting on these issues and stay humble.

The country has by far the largest number of LEED factories (138) in the world, among them 39 are LEED Platinum certified and as many as 84 are LEED Gold certified. Yet, so often, I see news popping around Bangladesh and the images used to represent factories do not represent the modern apparel factories here. Perhaps, as an industry, we need to improve our public relations although that is a story for another day.

Bangladesh has moved beyond Rana Plaza. The landscape stands neatly transformed.

But it goes deeper than this. I have been running my own factory for almost two decades. It is difficult to put into words the amount of change I have seen during the time in the industry. The Bangladesh apparel sector is a completely different proposition to what it was back then. It has had no choice but to change to meet the demands of a global fashion industry which never stands still.

There is also the issue of garment workers. Is worker unrest an issue in Bangladesh? From time to time yes, of course it is (as it is in many countries, even those in the west). Yet if one were to follow the social media streams of some NGOs, one would get the impression that Bangladesh garment factories are in a regular state of infighting and chaos.

My intention here is not to criticise people who write about Bangladesh. Many are doing fine work and I have faith that in most cases they are coming from a place of goodwill. The industry should

be ready to take this extraneous pressure as a motivation to even accelerate the improvements and get better beyond what it has already achieved. But the significant improvements the industry made over recent years should also be recognised by all stakeholders. Any mis-portrayal of the industry will actually demean the concerted efforts made by the manufacturers, buyers and the government to transform it.

I say with reasonable basis that too

the internet. This is not what Bangladesh looked like in the reports they had read, they tell us.

This modern side of our country, the real Bangladesh, is something we all need to play our part in promoting looking ahead as we seek to win hearts and minds and encourage would-be investors to look beyond the headlines.

I would like to take this opportunity to invite all our foreign friends to Bangladesh to see the Bangladesh apparel



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PHOTO: TASLIMA AKHTER

many people incorrectly label Bangladesh without ever coming to the land and visiting the factories. There is the other group of individuals who visit us on a regular basis—the buyers from big fashion brands who are witness to the quiet transformation. They are better placed than anyone else to speak for the real progress in Bangladesh apparel industry.

New buyers are often positively shocked when they come here. The reality does not match the perception they had formed by reading about us on

industry with their own eyes. We always appreciate any constructive criticism. But making sweeping comments that simply is not representative of the truth and publishing news that is far from the reality are not only undermining the progress Bangladesh made, but also barring the honest march of the global fashion industry towards safety and sustainability.

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