

BANGLADESH UPDATE



1,970
New cases in 24hrs



8,12,960
Total cases



12,869
Deaths



7,53,240
Recoveries



GLOBAL UPDATE



3,748,069
Deaths



174,241,726
Total cases

COVID TREATMENT IN PVT HOSPITALS

Will look into unusually high costs

Says health minister

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Health Minister Zahid Maleque yesterday said the government would look into overcharging Covid patients at private hospitals.

"We will look into this issue so that they [private hospitals] cannot overcharge patients," he said.

The minister was replying to a query from a journalist after formally inaugurating the National Vitamin A Plus Campaign in Dhaka.

Earlier in the day, Zahid told parliament that the treatment cost for a Covid patient at public hospitals was Tk 15,000 for general bed and Tk 50,000 for ICU bed per day.

"This was found in a study by the Health Economics Unit [of the health ministry]," the minister told journalists.

On May 1, the HEU study revealed that the government was spending, on average, Tk 1.28 lakh for treatment of a Covid patient in general bed and Tk 4.08 lakh in intensive care unit (ICU) of public hospitals.

The study also found that the Covid treatment cost was abnormally higher in private hospitals than that in public

healthcare facilities.

The major differences were found in the diagnosis and medicine costs. Experts said costs go up at private hospitals due to not following the national Covid-19 treatment protocol.

In case of private hospitals, the treatment cost for a Covid patient was around Tk 2.42 lakh in general beds and around Tk 5.09 lakh in ICU beds, said the HEU study. The total cost is borne by patients.

At private hospitals, a Covid patient spends the most on medicine, which is around 30 percent of the total treatment cost. This is almost double the amount spent at public hospitals.

The diagnosis cost in private hospitals is 17.7 percent of the total treatment cost. This is more than seven times the amount spent in public hospitals for the same purpose.

"The costs for diagnosis and medicine are abnormally higher in private hospitals than in public hospitals. This indicates that the national treatment protocol for Covid-19 is not being followed properly," Md Nurul Amin, director (research) at the HEU, told The Daily Star last month.



An employee of Ma O Shishu Hospital in Chattogram stacks the mattresses on a bed yesterday. The floor of the ward is filthy and wet as the ground floor of the healthcare facility had been inundated due to heavy rain in the port city the day before. The patients had to be moved to floors above.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

They charge at will

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saturation was so low that she was on mechanical ventilation the entire time. The cardiac patient did not need any assistance breathing and yet he had to pay more.

Both, ultimately, died of cardiac arrest.

And here again, there was a discrepancy: for the cardiac monitor, the cardiac patient was charged double that of the renal patient.

New Life Hospital charges Tk 150 per hour for the two types of machinery, according to Mostafizur Rahman, its manager of HR and administration, while Dhanmondi General and Kidney Hospital charge Tk 120 per hour, said Shameem Mahboob, its director for administration.

Mahboob acknowledged that the rates for the two pieces of equipment were hiked at the beginning of the year due to a rise in the prices of the two.

Meanwhile, over at Green Life Medical College Hospital, not too far away from the other two medical institutions, a patient who did not need any intensive care support for the five days he was admitted was charged almost as much: Tk 160,000.

"We were forced to purchase all the medicines from the hospital pharmacy at the MRP rate. We could have purchased them at the discounted trade price from any drug store," the patient's son Yasir Al Saad told The Daily Star.

For instance, he had to purchase an injection from the hospital pharmacy for Tk 4,000. Outside, it was available for Tk 3,500.

The patient's total medicine bill was Tk 62,731.

His regular bed also cost more than the ICU beds in the other two hospitals down the road: Tk 9,600 per day.

An ICU bed in Dhanmondi General and Kidney Hospital and New Life Hospital both cost Tk 7,000 per day.

Quizzed, Md Mainul Ahasan, managing director of Green Life Hospital, said: "You need to consider that the salary and benefits of doctors, nurses and other support staff have increased due to the pandemic."

About eight kilometres away from Green Life Hospital is Ibn Sina Medical College Hospital in Kallyanpur.

There, a 30-year-old inpatient was charged a whopping Tk 206,030 for a ten-day stay at a cabin -- without any intensive care support.

Asked about the large bill for seemingly basic treatment, an Ibn Sina spokesperson told The Daily Star that the hospital's Covid-19 cabins are more expensive than the regular ones as it pays risk allowance to the doctors, nurses and support staff.

"We also have to keep them isolated on a regular basis and provide food and accommodation for them during that period," he added.

But the patient, who was moderately ill, says he was given more medication than needed to bump up the medical bill.

Each day, he was administered at least Tk 5,000 worth of medicines.

For instance, he was given three Meropenem antibiotic injections each

day and each jab cost Tk 1,300.

His total medicine bill was Tk 63,440, which is significantly more than that of the cardiac patient at New Life Hospital.

If it isn't superfluous medication or indiscriminate charging for equipment or beds, a wholly new overhead has been created by some hospitals: isolation fee.

Farida Khanam was charged Tk 8,000 as an isolation fee for her 12-day stay at Popular Medical College Hospital.

"We don't know what that means," said her son-in-law.

Contacted, a spokesperson of Popular Medical College Hospital, said the hospital management has a dedicated 80-bed unit for Covid-patients.

"On some days, most of the 80 beds are vacant. To maintain this facility, we have added an isolation charge only once for the entire treatment," he added.

Khanam had to spend a day at the ICU, for which she was charged Tk 106,140. The bill does not give a breakdown of the charges.

"We had to pay Tk 4.48 lakh for hospital services for our entire stay. In addition, we had to spend Tk 98,200 for an injection to prevent a cytokine storm," her family said.

Some hospitals charge patients separately for personal protective equipment, masks and shoe covers meant for doctors, nurses and ward staff.

For example, a woman from Khilgaon receiving treatment at United Hospital for 12 days racked up Tk 33,141 in "medical disposables". These include PPE, shoe cover, masks, caps.

"This is so frustrating," said the woman's daughter.

The Daily Star inspected two other bills from the same hospital where a patient was charged Tk 62,401 for medical disposables for 12 days and another Tk 53,960 for 16 days.

This is a flat rate that all inpatients are charged, said Shagufa Anwar, United Hospital's director of communication and business development.

"A lot of the hospitals merge this with room charges, but we do not so that patients know what they are paying for," she added.

The service charge also varied between hospitals.

While Popular charged a flat 8 percent of the bill, New Life charged a lump sum equivalent to one day's bed charge.

At United, patients were not billed service charges but had to pay separately for inpatient care service and nursing charges.

For instance, the Khilgaon resident was charged Tk 36,000 and Tk 45,000 separately for inpatient care and nursing charges.

Because United does not allow family attendants, there was a ward staff who the patients could ring a bell and call for if they needed help, like going to the bathroom, the women's daughter said.

"We were charged for this service."

The nursing charge was what we had to pay for the nurses to come and

administer medication, she added.

Ibn Sina charges a sum for "infection control management".

For most, no amount of money is as valuable as getting their loved ones back alive. But when a life is lost and there is confusion about the treatment, that is when the bills start to sting.

Elias Hossain was admitted to Anwer Khan Modern Medical College and Hospital on April 24th at 10am and died less than 24 hours later. And for the brief stint, his family had to pay Tk 126,694.

Hossain's oxygen level was fluctuating, so the attending doctors prescribed him intensive care support, according to his son Rony.

But, he was admitted to a cabin. "We were told that they had high flow central oxygen supply, so my father would not face any problem."

But the central oxygen flow was not working properly, due to which Hossain's condition deteriorated rapidly.

"Then they sent him for a CT scan, which ate up precious time. Finally, when my father was admitted to HDU and got high flow oxygen, it was too late," he added.

The Daily Star obtained a copy of Hossain's prescription for verification.

Probed, AHM Enayet Hossain, a director of the Anwer Khan Modern Medical College, said the patient's bill was lower than what it should have been.

"We have to procure oxygen, expensive equipment and lifesaving drugs from various suppliers. While calculating the bills, we often consider the discounted price of oxygen therapy. If the patients are still not happy, tell them to go to the government hospitals. We are not forcing them to come here," he added.

The Green Life MD Ahasan, who is also the secretary-general of Bangladesh Private Clinic and Diagnostic Owners' Association, called upon the health ministry to take immediate measures to ensure quality service at an affordable price in private hospitals.

"It is really unfortunate that some hospitals are making a fortune by exploiting patients in this pandemic," he added.

The DGHS cannot take any action for indiscriminate charging in the absence of a pricing guideline for Covid-19 treatment, said Md. Farid Hossain Miah, director (hospital) of DGHS.

"Another fact is that different hospitals purchase medicines, oxygen and other equipment from different suppliers. So, they can fix the cost accordingly."

Work is on way to formulating a service standard and price regulation for private hospitals offering COVID-19 treatment, Miah added.

"We understand that private hospitals will charge for oxygen and other equipments that the government hospitals do not. But we are going through a crisis and this is the time to serve the nation," said Md Nurul Amin, director of research of HEU, who led the study team.

11 people killed in attack by gunmen in Nigeria

AFP, Abuja

Eleven people were killed after unknown gunmen attacked a town in southwestern Nigeria, police said on Sunday.

Details of the attack in Iangan in Oyo state late on Saturday were still emerging but parts of Africa's most populous country have been troubled for years by deadly clashes between nomadic herders and local farmers over access to resources.

"On 5th June, 2021 at about 2310hrs (22:10 GMT), suspected armed bandits... invaded Iangan Community in the dead of the night," Oyo state police spokesman Adewale Osifeso said in a statement.

"In the process, eleven persons including some of the assailants were confirmed dead," he added.

A number of buildings including a traditional ruler's palace and vehicles were also burned down.

Police said it deployed units on patrol "to forestall further disintegration of law and order in the area."

Ethnic tensions are not uncommon in Nigeria where more than 250 ethnic and linguistic groups live side by side.

Liberation came

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an independent nation," she said.

The prime minister said this in a prerecorded special discussion titled "Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Charter of Freedom for Bangladesh" held virtually, marking the historic Six-Point Demand Day, as the nation celebrates it every year on June 7.

Organised by Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Birth Centenary Celebration National Implementation Committee, the meeting was broadcast on Bangladesh Television, private television channels, online and social networking sites.

Hasina, also president of the ruling Awami League, said June 7 (1966) is very significant for the Bangalee nation and the day was inscribed as a red letter one as 11 people including labour leader Monu Mia sacrificed their lives in the hands of Pakistani forces while enforcing a nationwide hartal for the six-point formula and release of Bangabandhu.

Referring to several speeches by him to drum up support for the six-point demand, she said he knew well before that Bangladesh would be an independent country.

She quoted Bangabandhu as saying, "In this country, the Awami League first bears the message of every struggle. It is true that they [AL leaders and activists] were going through torture. But the movement didn't go in vain. The six-point demand will also not fail. We will make the struggle successful through sacrifices. InshaAllah, the victory will be ours."

The prime minister said the six-point demand was the outcome of Bangabandhu's thoughts over establishing the rights of the East Pakistani people as there were huge discriminations among the East and West Pakistani people in every sector, particularly in civil and military jobs.

She also recalled the contribution of her mother in making the nationwide 7th June hartal a success to press home the six-point demand by organising the party activists in the absence of Bangabandhu as he was in jail at that time.

The prime minister said the Father of the Nation placed the six-point formula (on February 5, 1966) before a meeting of all the opposition parties in Lahore, adding that the meeting did not endorse it and even ignored listing it in the agenda; some Bangladeshi politicians too did not support it.

She added Bangabandhu, who announced the six-point demand as AL's general secretary, later briefed the media about it at a press conference in Dhaka.

Seasoned politicians and AL Advisory Council Members, Amir Hossain Amu and Tofail Ahmed, and Prof Nazma Shaheen also spoke at the virtual discussion moderated by Dr Nuzhat Chowdhury.

MPs rap the health ministry

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Millions of people go to India for medical treatment, meaning crores of taka are flowing out of the country. This can be prevented by overhauling the health sector, he noted.

The BNP lawmaker said the health minister should clearly state when the vaccination programme will resume.

Twenty lakh people are now waiting to get their second vaccine jab following the suspension of the vaccination programme, he mentioned.

"If necessary, vaccine import should be made open to all. But measures have to be taken so that no corruption takes place. In the past, a company that has links with an adviser to the prime minister brought vaccines..."

Rumeen Farhana, a lawmaker from the BNP, said that amid the pandemic, India increased allocation for the health sector by 137 percent in this year's budget, compared to that in the previous year. But in Bangladesh, it has been raised by only 12 percent.

Besides, the health ministry cannot spend its budget allocation. It could spend only 25 percent of the ADP allocation in 10 months of the outgoing fiscal year.

"The health minister has to answer why 75 percent of the funds remains unused."

JP lawmaker Kazi Firoz Rashid said, "Now we need uninterrupted oxygen supply at public hospitals. But instead of ensuring it, MRI and CT scan machines are being bought and sent to different hospitals. Moreover, these machines remain idle as these hospitals don't have technicians to operate those."

Harassment of Rozina

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He said the health officials tried to strangle Rozina and a case has been filed against her. "There are rumors that a sedition case can be filed against her," said Quader, also chairman of Jatiya Party.

"We want the rule of law, punishment for anyone who commits a crime. But those who work in the media have some responsibilities. Journalism is a pillar of the state. Investigative journalism is for ensuring accountability. It is the responsibility of the society to create such an opportunity for journalists," he said.

Another JP MP Kazi Firoz Rashid said a journalist can be arrested for committing theft and robbery. "But why they [health officials] have taken the law into their own hands. She was detained for six hours. She was not allowed to go to the toilet for six hours. Can a sick

woman be harassed this way?"

"The United Nations, the whole world has talked about it. How can we show our face now?"

JP lawmaker Raushan Ara Mannan also criticised the health ministry officials for harassing Rozina.

"Why she was not immediately handed over to the police if the journalist did something wrong. Why she was detained and tortured for six hours. Countrymen are criticising it," she added.

BNP MP Mosharrif Hossain said it was not acceptable that a secretary-level official had tried to strangle her and torture her.

On May 17, Rozina was kept confined to the health ministry for over five hours before being handed over to police. It happened after the journalist went to the secretariat to perform her duties.

Govt plans free Covid tests

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"We are planning to waive the test fee for those highly infected districts for a certain period," Health Minister Zahid Maleque told The Daily Star on Sunday.

"If we test 10 and find five positive cases, it means the positivity rate is 50 percent. This does not reflect the real picture. So, the meeting decided to stress on increasing the number of tests," the minister said, adding that there is no alternative to increasing testing.

"The more people are tested, the clearer the picture we will get."

He also said as transport workers move across the country, a designated place would be fixed for their tests and in that case antigen rapid tests will be done.

Civil Surgeon of Rajshahi Quiume Talukder told The Daily Star that the situation in the division is alarming and that is why they requested the health minister to waive the test fee.

"The minister assured us of waiving it and hoped that the decision will come soon," he said.

Lalmonirhat district civil surgeon

Nirmalendu Roy said testing is very important to detect cases early, adding that free testing would encourage the financially insolvent people of this region to undergo tests.

"Now we need to do more test. If the test is made free for the suspected cases, we can detect the cases early and can cut the transmission," said Nirmalendu Roy, adding that the positivity rate has been rising in Nilphamari since May 31 and it now stands at around 20 percent.

The Covid-19 testing was initially free for all at government hospitals when the deadly disease hit the country in March last year.

But on June 29 last year, the government imposed a fee to "avoid unnecessary tests and ensure better management".

Amid criticism from various quarters, the government later reduced the fee.

Currently, a Covid-19 test in government-designated booth costs Tk 100 while it is Tk 300 if the sample is collected from home. Both prices are subsidised by the government.

Hefajat declares committee 'under watch'

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Muhibullah Babunagari, a relative of Junayed Babunagari, is the chief of the central and advisory committees.

Except Junayed, Muhibullah, Nurul, and a couple of other leaders, the individuals in the leadership are comparatively little known among Hefajat activists.

Well-known leaders like Mamunul Haque, Junayed Al Habib, Abdur Rob Yusufi, Ahmed Abdul Kader, Azizul Haq Islamabadi, Khalid Saifullah, Mufti Harun Izhar, who are in jail, no longer have leadership roles.

All except Mahfuzur are remaining in jail at present, sources in Hefajat said.

Mamunul's elder brother Mahfuzul Haque, also an influential leader, is not in jail. But he is not named in the new committee.

Hefajat's previous central committee was disbanded on April 25 amid a government crackdown on Hefajat leaders following the islamist

organisations' violence across the country in late March.

A five-member convening committee headed by Junayed and Nurul as its amir and member-secretary was formed at the time.

In November 2020, around two months after the death of Hefajat chief Shah Ahmad Shafi, Babunagari and Nur Hossain Kasemi were named as the new amir and secretary general.

Nurul Islam was made the secretary general after Kasemi died in December. Asked during the event, Nurul Islam said there was no pressure from the government or from the intelligence agencies about the formation of the new committee.

But insiders said the government influenced the formation of the new committee, making sure the individuals involved in political parties associated with the BNP are axed.

Talking to this correspondent after the briefing, Nurul Islam also admitted

that the new committee members were not involved in politics.

Asked whether Hefajat leaders now in jail would be incorporated in the committee later, Nurul Islam said the top leaders will make such decisions.

Sources said the new central committee includes Yusuf Madani, son of Ahmad Shafi, and another man, who was a follower of the late Hefajat chief, because of government pressure.

After Shafi died in September last year, a new committee was formed excluding the Hefajat leaders who were close to Shafi.

Nurul Islam yesterday said the three new committees were formed through discussions in the five-member convening committee.

Hefajat has been under tremendous pressure from the government to restructure its central committee since the mayhem in late March, sources said.

At least 17 people were killed in clashes between Hefajat men and law enforcers in different parts of the country, especially in Brahmanbaria.

At least 154 cases were filed against Hefajat men in the following days while around 1,230 people, including more than 30 top Hefajat leaders, were arrested, according to police headquarters data.

Following the recent crackdown on Hefajat, some of its leaders started trying to negotiate with the government in hopes of avoiding "arrest and harassment".

The Islamist organisation first made headlines in 2009 by protesting a draft national women development policy that provided equal inheritance rights to women.

It is often said that hostility between Hefajat and the AL government turned amicable through closed-door negotiations amid a government crackdown after Hefajat's mayhem in the capital in May, 2013.