

Our cancer care needs more attention

Why don't we have a national cancer control strategy yet?

THE current state of cancer care in Bangladesh is, indeed, distressing. Although the number of cancer patients is increasing every year, diagnosis and treatment remain inaccessible to a vast majority of the population—particularly those from low-income groups and rural areas—as a result of overwhelming treatment costs, scarcity of trained professionals, and unavailability of crucial equipment. To cite just a few depressing examples: among the 36 government medical college hospitals, only 14 have oncology departments (which are understaffed and underequipped); radiotherapy machines of Dhaka and Mymensingh medical college hospitals have been out of order for years; and there are no radiotherapy machines available to people living in Khulna, Rangpur, and Barishal divisions. The list, unfortunately, goes on and on.

Despite such gaping holes in the provision of cancer care in the country, we are yet to adopt a national cancer control strategy, action plan and programme. Reportedly, patients in Bangladesh are being treated following the cancer protocol developed by the US National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) for their own citizens, even though our healthcare systems are nowhere near comparable.

According to a latest report by World Health Organization (WHO), there are around 1.5 million cancer patients in Bangladesh, and at least 150,000 deaths every year. About 200,000 new patients are diagnosed each year. However, there is no database to preserve detailed information on the actual number of patients in the country, the most common causes of cancer, and district-wise prevalence, without which it's impossible to prepare a cancer prevention and treatment strategy. In comparison, our neighbour India has 30 such databases which are centrally coordinated. Why, in 50 years, have we failed to simply initiate a database for cancer patients? There is no conceivable answer.

While early diagnosis and screening have proven to improve a patient's chances of survival and reduce the cost significantly, the government is yet to take effective strategies to integrate early detection in its national health system. Massive awareness is needed, especially in rural areas, to ensure early detection, as well as provision of screening services at the upazila level across the country. Meanwhile, the state of palliative care here is even more deplorable, with a majority of cancer patients suffering from immense pain in silence.

There are only 20-22 cancer service centres for a population of over 165 million, but according to WHO, there should be one for every one million, which underscores just how far behind we are in ensuring accessible care. We urge the government to develop a national protocol for cancer diagnosis, treatment and care, and initiate a population-based cancer registry without any more delay.

Indigenous kids deserve books in native languages

Govt must act on its plan to bring pro-indigenous reforms in schools

THE government's 2017 move to publish and distribute textbooks in five ethnic languages—and its decision that ethnic minority students would learn exclusively in their native languages from the pre-primary level up to Class II (and gradually learn Bangla from Class III)—were welcomed by rights advocates as a long-overdue reform in the education sector. It was then hoped that this would take us one step closer to our vision of an inclusive Bangladesh, with equal rights and privileges shared by all communities. However, five years on, it seems the project is falling through due to a lack of administrative initiatives.

As this daily reported on February 1, 2022, students at many schools in Sreemangal upazila, with a majority of them belonging to indigenous communities, are being taught in Bangla because they never get enough sets of books in other languages. One headteacher alleged that in 2021, they had only received teachers' copies of two textbooks to teach students of the Tripura community. In 2022, they received none.

More concerningly, teachers in areas with a large indigenous population are not trained nearly well enough to teach children to read and write in their respective mother languages. A report from 2020 states how, since 2017, only 38.6 percent of the 4,204 ethnic community teachers in the three hill districts had attended a 14-day training programme on indigenous languages. This begs the question: What use is having textbooks in ethnic languages if they don't reach their intended recipients? Even if or when those books are made available, how can a teacher be expected to educate students properly if they themselves have not received the training to do so? And what are the higher authorities doing about it? Not much, going by the conclusion of our report. Surely, this was a plan that was meant to be followed through for years to come, and not just a "show of inclusivity"?

We believe the government needs to re-evaluate its indigenous textbook plan to make it effective. Teachers must be given extensive training in reading, writing, and usage of these languages that they can impart upon their students. Textbooks in indigenous languages must also be distributed for all subjects, and in the quantities required, on a priority basis. The government needs to follow through with its own plan so that children of ethnic communities are not deprived of the opportunity to study in their own languages.

Want to save our nation's future? Reopen schools.



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND
Dr Shamsad Mortuza is the pro-vice-chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

LET'S admit it: the time for debate on school reopening is over. It's time to stop treating education as an afterthought, as if it's not a priority. Observing the Covid infection peak-plateau curve to decide whether schools should be open or not, while treating education as a secondary sector in the matrix, has done enough damage—not only to the students and their parents, but also to the entire nation. The short- and long-term effects of the ever-evolving pandemic on the education sector are yet to be measured. But if we don't rethink education as a frontline sector, there will be nothing to measure in the long run.

As a practising academic administrator, my observation is simple: if banks and hospitals can stay open, schools can too. Once we put the same safety measures that we expect other institutions to follow, once we pursue the five key pillars of pandemic control: masking, social distancing, hand-washing, cleaning, and contact-tracing when exposures occur and quarantining those exposed, I don't see any reason why we shouldn't let our students out of the Zoom boxes and back into their classrooms. The accessibility to vaccines gives us additional hope.

We will never reach a consensus on whether schools can be made safe from the coronavirus. Health experts will always have their own measurement sticks. There's no reason to doubt their scientific explanations. But to think schools are the only places where our young ones are exposed to the risk of infection is a fallacy that we cannot afford to entertain. The other parts of society have started to pick up their regular tempo, and the chances of getting contaminated in the communities are equally high for those attending their classes online. The sooner we accept that in-person instruction is essential and physical presence in classrooms is important for the overall learning environment, the easier it will be to reopen our schools. The delayed return to classrooms will only prolong the emergency mode that we adopted at the start of the pandemic. In the last two years, we have learned to live with the disease. It's about time we relearn to live offline.

Research shows that Covid infection rates in schools have not been higher than in communities. In fact, tracking cases in schools is relatively straightforward as we are dealing with a controlled environment. But the problem arises the moment we are asked to adjudge whether students,



▲ **Online learning cannot emulate the experience that in-person classes provide.**

FILE PHOTO: STAR

supply and aid for gadgets came in too little, too late. Meanwhile, we witnessed disproportionate recourse to online teaching platforms and accessibility. We can gloat over the commercial ad in which a father makes a bamboo mobile holder for his daughter's online classes in a peripheral village. The reality is: there is a limit to that particular student's access to a virtual classroom. The internet speed required for video streaming, class participation and presentation is far from ideal. The affordability of services soon becomes an issue. The urban-rural and the rich-poor divides become a reality. Add to that the mental health issues that plague students exposed to excessive screen time without any human interaction.

From my interaction with parents and colleagues, I can tell how social isolation affects our students as they struggle to stay focused on their online lessons. Many students in remote-learning situations are falling behind academically. Their work ethics are changing. They are often taking advantage of the home environment to cheat in their examinations. Many do other things while leaving their devices logged in to virtual classes.

The overall monitoring that schools

balance their regular jobs and parenting. They are forced to give their wards undue access to the internet in the name of virtual schooling. Once we factor in all the damage that school closure has done to our children—and, by extension, to the education sector—we realise that there is no reason to suspend school services every time there is a twist in the infection curve. Panic responses will keep on sending mixed signals to all stakeholders.

Online education served its purpose as a stop-gap solution. I think it's time to return to school with a renewed understanding of education. Education is as important as other frontline sectors. The massive vaccination drive undertaken by the government gives us some comfort in welcoming our students back to classrooms. We just need to insist on mask-wearing, physical distancing, and other mitigation measures to ease the process. These are the children who will probably make the best of the education, and come up with solutions to protect us from a similar pandemic in the future. Let's turn them into warm bodies in a physical classroom, rather than zombies in Zoom rooms.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

How China views the Ukraine crisis



Minxin Pei, professor at Claremont McKenna College, is a non-resident senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

MINXIN PEI

BEIJING may be 6,500km from Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, but the geopolitical stakes for China in the escalating crisis over Ukraine's fate could not be higher. If Russia invades Ukraine and precipitates a drawn-out conflict with the US and its Western allies (though a direct military confrontation is unlikely), China obviously stands to benefit. America will need to divert strategic resources to confront Russia, and its European allies will be even more reluctant to heed US entreaties to join its anti-China coalition.

But if US President Joe Biden defuses the crisis by acceding to some of Russian President Vladimir Putin's demands, China will likely end up worse off strategically. While Putin will reap the benefits of his coercive diplomacy, and Biden will avoid a potential quagmire in Eastern Europe, China will find itself the sole focus of US national security strategy. Worse still, after Putin has skillfully exploited the US obsession with China to re-establish Russia's sphere of influence, the strategic value of his China card may depreciate significantly.

For Putin, capitalising on Biden's fear of being dragged into a conflict with a secondary adversary (Russia) in order to extract critical security concessions is a risky but smart move. But ordering an invasion of Ukraine—and thus effectively volunteering to be the US' primary geopolitical adversary, at least in the

Chinese reticence on Ukraine suggests that Xi is carefully hedging his bets. To be sure, Putin's aggressive diplomacy is serving Chinese interests—at least for now. Should he decide to invade Ukraine and divert the US strategic focus away from China, so much the better.

short to medium term—is hardly in the Kremlin's interest. Crippling Western sanctions and the high costs of fighting an insurgency in Ukraine would almost certainly weaken Russia significantly, and make Putin himself both domestically unpopular and more dependent on Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Intriguingly, despite the high stakes for China in the Ukraine crisis, the Chinese government has been extremely careful about showing its hand. While the heightened tensions dominate Western media headlines, Ukraine receives scant coverage in the official Chinese press. Between December 15, 2021, when Putin and Xi held a virtual summit, and January 24, 2022, *The People's Daily*, the official mouthpiece of the Communist Party of China, carried only one article about the crisis—on the inconclusive talks in mid-January between Russia and the US and its NATO allies. Editorials or commentaries voicing Chinese support for Russia are also notable by their absence.

Even more intriguingly, the summary of the Putin-Xi summit released by the Kremlin claimed that Xi supported Putin's demand for Western security guarantees precluding NATO's further eastward expansion, but the Chinese version, published by the official Xinhua news agency, contained no such reference. Instead of explicitly endorsing Putin's position, Xi's statement was vague and general pabulum about "providing firm mutual support on issues involving each other's core interests."

The pattern continued when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on January 27. Western media characterised Wang's statement on Ukraine as an expression of support for Putin. In fact, Wang planted China's diplomatic stake

squarely on the sidelines, only saying that "Russia's reasonable security concerns should be stressed and resolved."

Chinese reticence on Ukraine suggests that Xi is carefully hedging his bets. To be sure, Putin's aggressive diplomacy is serving Chinese interests—at least for now. Should he decide to invade Ukraine and divert the US strategic focus away from China, so much the better.

But, assuming that Xi does not know the Kremlin's real intentions vis-a-vis Ukraine, he is prudent not to show his own cards either. Any expression of unequivocal Chinese support for Putin's demands could leave China with little wiggle room. At worst, goading Putin down the path of war could be construed in some circles in Moscow as a diabolical Chinese plot to use Russia as a strategic pawn in the Sino-American cold war. Alternatively, should Putin choose to pocket face-saving gains in order to avoid a potential disaster, China would look foolish for having backed the Kremlin's unattainable demands.

China's leaders are realists and know that they can do little to influence the outcome of the current crisis in Ukraine—even if they choose to intervene publicly. With Putin holding most of the cards in the ongoing stand-off, China's diplomatic support is unlikely to alter the strategic calculus of the principal protagonists in Washington, Brussels, or even Moscow. Its influence will increase dramatically only if Putin rolls the dice and invades Ukraine, because he will then need Chinese economic support to lessen the impact of Western sanctions.

But for now, all this is speculative as far as Xi is concerned. Although a superpower, China is temporarily reduced to being an onlooker, watching both anxiously and hopefully on the sidelines as the Ukraine crisis unfolds.