Heart treatment still Dhaka-centric

MOUDUD AHMMED SUJAN

Seventy-year-old Abul Khaer, a resident of Nabinagar in Brahmanbaria, felt chest pain at midnight recently. His family waited till morning before taking him to a private hospital in Homna upazila of Cumilla, a two-hour drive from their home.

But the doctor at the facility referred the patient to the National Institute of Cardiovascular Institute (NICVD) in Dhaka as they did not have the necessary equipment to provide treatment. Khaer was then taken to NICVD in the afternoon and the doctors there started his treatment right away.

However, it was too late by then and the patient died that night.

"By the time we reached the heart institute [NICVD], we lost around 16 hours. I am so unfortunate that I could not save my father," Khaer's son Md Jamal told The Daily Star.

Almost half of the patients coming to the NICVD, the lone specialised hospital for heart patients with a 400-bed capacity, are from different distant districts as there is a lack of well-equipped heart disease treatment centres outside Dhaka city, according to doctors.

"The lives of many of them could have been saved if they had received proper treatment at their nearest hospital," the on-duty doctor at the NICVD emergency unit told this correspondent after approving the admission of Abul Khaer.

He said the treatment protocol for cardiac arrest patients is the same everywhere.

"But doctors cannot give treatment without the necessary supporting staff and equipment, which is absent in the district-level public hospitals," he said on condition of anonymity.

The coronary care units of divisional level hospitals are also not well-equipped and cannot even accommodate all patients due to an inadequate number of beds, he added.

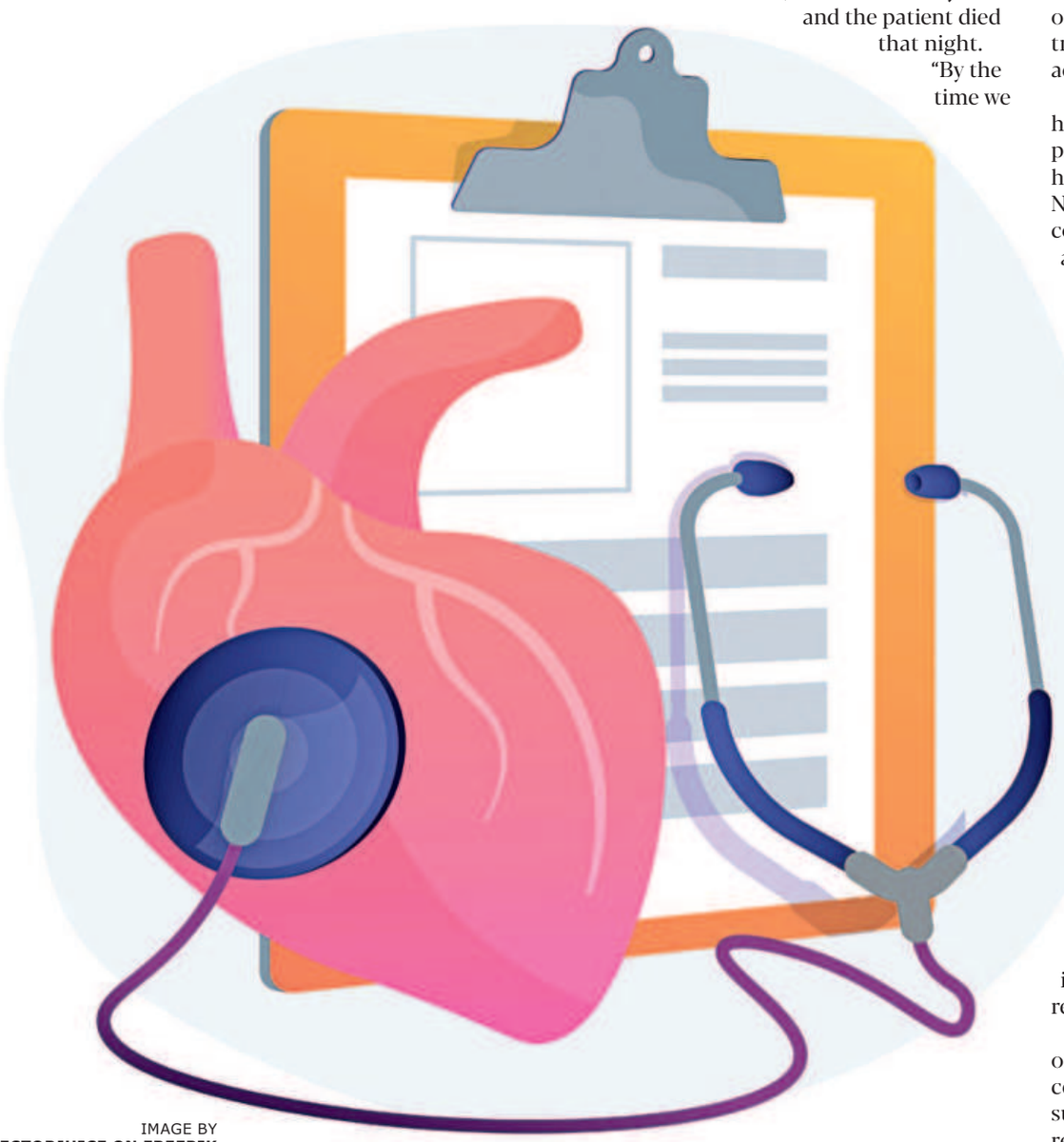

IMAGE BY VECTORJUICE ON FREEPIK

DHAKA-CENTRIC TREATMENT FACILITY

Cardiovascular disease has become a cause of increasing concern for Bangladesh with a growing number of patients suffering from it. An NICVD study in 2018 found that the prevalence of cardiovascular disease in Bangladeshis is 4.5 per cent regardless of the type.

On the contrary, the number of full-fledged cardiac treatment centres, cardiologists and cardiac surgeons is extremely inadequate, resulting in many preventable deaths, experts say.

The number of cardiac care units in both public and private facilities across the country increased to 43 from 42 last year.

However, just 29 hospitals are equipped to conduct cardiovascular surgery. Of those, 21 are in Dhaka city, four in Chattogram, two in Khulna, and one each in Sylhet and Sirajganj, according to the Cardiac Surgeons Society of Bangladesh (CSSB).

In Dhaka, 16 of these facilities are privately owned and carry out the majority of cardiac surgeries that number up to 12,000 on average each year.

In government facilities, the fees for cardiac surgery begin at Tk 1.10 lakh while the lowest fee that private hospitals take is around Tk 3.70 lakh.

In the past one year, the overall cost for cardiac surgery in private facilities has increased by around 25 per cent, according to officials.

In the past one year, the cardiac care centre in Sylhet run by the National Heart Foundation and the one in Imperial Hospital in Chattogram were closed down, this newspaper learnt.

On the other hand, three new ones were added to the list: one at Sir Salimullah Medical College Hospital in Dhaka, another at Evercare Hospital in Chattogram, and the third one was resumed at the Zia Heart Foundation in Dinajpur.

"Operating a cardiac surgery unit requires not only surgeons, but also at least 30 supporting staff to perform different tasks simultaneously. However, there is a huge shortage of human resources in this regard," said Dr Monzur Hossain, a cardiac surgeon at the NICVD.

Currently, there are 643 cardiologists and cardiac surgeons in the country, as per data from the Bangladesh Cardiac Society.

Of them, 230 are cardiac surgeons but only 45-50 are capable of conducting surgeries independently, according to the CSSB.

Of these independent surgeons, 32 work in Dhaka.

Hossain said that although the number of surgeons is inadequate compared to the number of patients, not everyone can work independently due to the absence of a full-fledged cardiac surgery unit.

Aside from surgery facilities, there are six public medical colleges in Rangpur, Rajshahi, Khulna, Sylhet, Mymensingh and Barishal that have coronary care units.

However, only angiograms and other related diagnostic facilities are available at these colleges. Besides, these services often remain unavailable due to a shortage of doctors, various sources said.

This newspaper spoke with a number of cardiac doctors and surgeons working in different government facilities, who said that although there are primary care facilities for heart disease at the district level, they are not up to the mark.

So, patients prefer rushing to the capital city for treatment, they added.

"If the district level hospitals had full-fledged cardiac units with doctors and skilled human resources, the heart attack patients would get proper care at the very beginning," said Prof Sohel Reza Choudhury, head of the department of epidemiology and research at the National Heart Foundation."So, the government needs to address this issue urgently," Choudhury added.

In 2020, the government approved the development of eight full-fledged cancer hospitals complete with well-equipped cardiac units in all divisional cities.

The issue of strengthening the existing cardiac care units in the medical college hospitals and the district level hospitals has been much-talked about since the outbreak of Covid-19, but almost no progress has been made so far.

For heart's sake

In the last two decades, our society has greatly transformed due to rapid urbanisation. People, especially youths, are eating more meat than vegetables in urban areas. Nutritionists find that changing food habits is a growing concern for accelerating heart diseases.

PRIYAM PAUL

Cardiovascular diseases are the world's leading cause of mortality, claiming an estimated 17.9 million lives each year, according to the World Health Organization.People are at high risk of developing heart disease irrespective of age. Our lifestyle choices have a significant impact on how healthy our hearts are. Heart disease can be prevented by leading a healthy lifestyle.

MAINTAIN AN ACTIVE LIFESTYLE

Doctors say having a sedentary lifestyle leads to cardiac complications. To avoid this, they recommend exercising so that our hearts can pump adequate blood throughout the body and our heart functions accordingly.

Walking is a common type of exercise that is easy to continue and requires less effort than other forms of exercise such as yoga, aerobics, and pilates.

However, due to severe air pollution, heavy traffic, congested footpaths and a lack of open places like fields, walking is difficult in urban areas nowadays. Yet again, if one desires to be physically active, several options are available.

Many gyms and yoga centres are expanding rapidly in almost every corner of the city, which can help us maintain our health and keep our hearts active.

"We can prevent half of our health issues by doing exercises regularly," said Mina Chowdhury, the yoga instructor at Joysan Yoga Centre.

Many organisations conduct regular or weekly physical activity sessions such as yoga, walking and other exercises in both indoor and outdoor settings. People can join these initiatives alone or with friends to maintain their heart health.

WE ARE WHAT WE EAT

Unhealthy and unhygienic foods are among the leading causes of heart disease and people frequently consume them nowadays, according to Dr Deen Mohammad Anwarul Kabir, Associate Professor and Senior Consultant of cardiac surgery at the National Heart Foundation.

Besides, many prefer packaged food due to their busy lives and a majority of our population is ignorant about the negative consequences of these foods, he said.

"In Western society, they are used to junk food, but at the same time, they spend a considerable amount on physical exercise, which we are significantly lagging," he added.

In the last two decades, our society has greatly transformed due to rapid urbanisation. People, especially youths, are eating more meat than vegetables in urban areas. Nutritionists find that changing food habits is a growing concern for accelerating heart diseases.

"Red meats contain huge amounts of fat which is bad for the heart, especially for elderly people. But fish oil is perfect for the wellbeing of the heart and also one should keep vegetables in the diet at least on every alternative day," said Dr Md Akhtaruzamman, Professor of the Institute of Nutrition and Food Science at Dhaka University.

For nearly two decades, the American Heart Association has recommended that people with coronary heart disease consume omega-3-fatty acids (the kinds of fatty acids found in fish and fish oil) to prevent another heart attack.

Therefore, reducing red meat in the diet chart and keeping fish could be a way out for a controlled, heart-friendly diet.

Nutritionists advise that a chapter on a healthy diet and eating habits be included in the elementary education level so that kids can learn it at a young age.

Apart from food-related issues, Dr Deen Mohammad put importance on giving up smoking, alcohol, salt and avoiding dust.

STOP IGNORING MENTAL HEALTH

Nowadays, people, regardless of age, face many psychological issues like depression, stress and anxiety that have a negative impact on heart health.

"What happens is that because of social stigma, many are hesitant to disclose their mental illness. This stands for a huge potential risk of heart attacks," said Dr Sayedul Ashraf Kushal , lead psychiatrist and MD of LifeSpring.

According to the American Cardiology Association, 30 per cent of heart diseases affect people under the age of 30, and 90 per cent of mental stress-related illnesses remain untreated, he added.

Additionally, Kushal pointed out that when under mental stress, our brains release a hormone called cortisol, which greatly affects the heart's ability to circulate blood. Everyone needs to be conscious of the possibility that mental stress could eventually result in heart disease.

So, to keep our heart healthy, we must maintain our mental well-being.