

OSD overload is hurting rural patients

Amid doctor crisis, can our health system afford so many OSDs?

The crisis of doctors in rural hospitals and health complexes is a well-known phenomenon, with top government officials including the prime minister often decrying it. The latest to join the bandwagon is the health minister who, on Tuesday, admitted how he was being confronted with questions "everywhere I went". Against this backdrop, a report by *Prothom Alo* comes as somewhat of a revelation. Citing sources, it reveals that there are currently 7,459 doctors who have been made OSD—Officers on Special Duty—accounting for 21 percent of all physician posts (35,503) in government facilities. This is one of the main reasons for the perennial doctor crisis.

In other words, the government itself is largely responsible for it. While the rules allow OSD designation of up to 10 percent of officials in approved posts, the health authorities have more than doubled it to the detriment of rural patients who are often forced to seek treatment in Dhaka or elsewhere. The OSD status can be triggered for a number of reasons—it can be to allow leave for training and education purposes; it can be a form of punishment for misconduct. Whatever the reason, those serving as OSDs, or doctors on leave, are liable to regular salaries and benefits despite being absent from work. The question is, can our overwhelmed public health system afford so many OSDs?

Other reasons for the doctor crisis include unauthorised absenteeism and delays in recruitment. The former has been attributed to doctors' lack of motivation and incentives to work in rural areas as well as lack of enforcement of service rules—both of which the health minister has vowed to address. There is no reliable data on how many doctors are absentees or have a history of disappearing without leave, but the number is feared to be substantial. These "missing" doctors, in government facilities where resources are already overstretched, are doing a great disservice to their patients and the nation at large. But we must not underestimate the role of the authorities in this regard.

The recruitment issue is one that almost all government institutions, not just medical, seem to suffer from. We have previously reported on the acute shortage of nurses and other health professionals in public hospitals. Even government medical colleges are no exception, with 42 percent of the teaching posts in 37 such colleges currently lying vacant. The addition of the OSD problem further compounds this crisis. We, therefore, urge the government to take a holistic approach to this issue and do everything necessary to ensure that patients, especially in rural hospitals, are properly served.

Will Kamrangirchar locals be displaced?

Govt must address concerns surrounding mega development plan

We are concerned about the fate of 20 lakh residents of the Kamrangirchar area in Dhaka who fear eviction from their homes. This is because Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) has decided to build a commercial hub on 1,200 acres of land there. Residents say turning this area into a commercial hub would be illegal as it is not part of the Detailed Area Plan (DAP). What is most outrageous is the arbitrariness of this decision without prior discussion with the people living there, many for generations.

According to a report by this daily, the DSCC is planning to build a business district to attract foreign businesses to invest in the billion-dollar project. According to the draft plan, the project plans a total transformation of the place by including a 50-storey high-rise convention centre, amphitheatres, luxury condominiums, high-end office buildings, restaurants, and much more. This would have been welcome news if it had been done with the acceptance of the local population who would be severely affected by the project. There should have been proper discussions as well as guarantees of their inclusion in the planned development. But if many of the residents have to be displaced, how would they be compensated for the loss of their homes?

Poet Nirmalendu Goon, who has been living in the area for the last 15 years and is president of Kamrangirchar Nagorik Parishad, has rightly said that the DSCC cannot plan a mega project without consulting with the 20 lakh residents first. He also questioned whether the DSCC has the authority to implement it at all. A physician quoted in our report said his ancestors have lived in the same homestead for 400 years. There are, moreover, thousands of small and medium industries employing several lakh people. Would all these businesses be compensated and those affected people given jobs? There are many questions and few answers at the moment.

We urge the authorities to make sure that these questions are answered satisfactorily and the plan is discussed thoroughly with the local residents of Kamrangirchar. If it goes against their interests, it should be shelved. No one should be coerced into leaving their homes or places of work.

New Message

To

Subject

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Can we rethink the city we want?



Azmin Azran is a journalist at The Daily Star.

AZMIN AZRAN

Following the tragic fire at Dhaka's Bailey Road last week, fingers are being pointed at restaurant owners and regulators. Raids are being conducted to shut down restaurants that don't have proper safety measures. This is typical of any notable accident in Bangladesh. Immediate reactions include tough rhetoric and strong enforcement of existing regulations, until the next terrible thing happens and everyone moves on.

But have we stopped to wonder why this tragedy had to happen? The easy answer is it happened because too many restaurants, businesses, and buildings in general in Dhaka are cavalier about safety. But then, why are there so many restaurants in Dhaka? Why do these restaurants feel compelled to skirt around safety measures? And why do all of these restaurants have to be stuffed into skyscrapers that far too often become concrete coffins and furnaces?

Many of Dhaka's streets seem to have been taken over by restaurants during the past decade or so. Buildings like Green Cozy Cottage Shopping Mall in Bailey Road where the fire took place, which are predominantly used for restaurants and nothing else, are beyond common.

Yet, it's not as if we have "too many" restaurants. These are commercial, for-profit entities who won't exist unless it makes financial sense for them. Attempt to visit a well-regarded restaurant in Dhaka on a Thursday night or any holiday, and it will be clear that the kitchens are struggling to keep up with orders, and they are often unable to seat every patron.

However, there is something to be said about the rate at which restaurants have increased. The study titled "Hotel-Restaurant Survey 2021", published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), says that the number of restaurants, hotels, and tea stalls across the country rose from over 275,000 in 2009-10 to over 436,000 in 2021. This data quantifies the perception that, seemingly with every blink, a bunch of new restaurants open up wherever we look.

This rapid expansion of the restaurant sector has led to the cutting of many vital corners when it comes to safety. Mobile courts and RAJUK officials may be cracking down on specific violations, but the reality is that this drive will wane. Eventually, the biriyani places they shut down will be replaced by new ones who may cut corners on some other safety measure to keep their competitive edge. This is bound to happen because the public's need to go and have a meal outside will not subside any time soon. The culture of grabbing a meal outside



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Wouldn't it be nice if Dhaka residents had a few more options for recreation that didn't involve eating?

once in a while is an inseparable part of modern urban life.

Dhaka's story is much the same, but those who live in this city will point to another fact of life here that drives people to go to restaurants more so than in other cities. In Dhaka, there isn't much to do other than to go out and eat. Cultural events do take place, but there aren't nearly enough of them. The next natural step in this discourse leads to an old culprit—the lack of open spaces.

Of course, the talk of open space leads one to parks and plazas, of which there are few in this city. While they do provide alternatives for recreation, there isn't much reason to believe restaurant crowds will be diverted to parks as soon as they start existing. Where will they eat?

However, we can expand the idea of open spaces to include walking-friendly streets and human-scale construction where the focus is to connect streetside establishments like restaurants and shops with the streets that they are situated on. Think eateries where the seating spills out onto the streets, groceries where you can shop standing on the footpath, window shopping that is possible without entering a shopping mall, and streets with wide pavements where building height is restricted so people don't have to crane their necks to see what's on offer.

Other than serving the purposes that a street is supposed to, pedestrian friendly streets can become destinations themselves. Like a park or a plaza, people visit these areas because they are appealing options for recreation. Suddenly, Dhaka's long-standing problem with hawkers becomes a blessing, and a chance to develop the prevalence of streetside

denounces the idea of car-centric development, and buildings that separate their occupants from their surroundings. It's an ambitious way of looking at modern cities that Dhaka, as the capital of a still-developing Bangladesh, may not be able to afford to buy into completely.

But here's the thing, the way Dhaka has developed naturally

shopping that already exists in the city and turn it into a cultural feature.

All of this is possible by foregoing the idea of uncontrolled density, and letting go of the greed that drives landowners to make use of every square inch of floor space available to them. What businesses in these areas might lose by not building high-rises can be offset with the number of people who show up to these areas with no preconceived plans of spending money, but do so anyway because the environment is pleasant and the options are present. Another way to do this would be to encourage mixed use buildings, where the ground floor is given up for commercial activity while the upper floors house apartments or offices.

If these ideas sound familiar, that's because versions of these practices are common in our city already. Mixed use buildings are easy to spot in many neighbourhoods, and as for streetside commercial activity, it's everywhere. Without incorporating proper zoning regulations and walkability, however, these features feel like a blight on the face of this city, which is possibly how many of us perceive them anyway.

The ideas of "New Urbanism"—an urban design movement—promote cities that prioritise walkable neighbourhoods, human-scale design, and open public spaces. It is a relatively new movement that

over time has many new urbanist elements ingrained in it. In many old neighbourhoods, mixed use buildings and necessities like groceries and schools do exist within walkable distances. Strong community bonds persevere even today in some places, where the moholla is still a strong social unit.

Yet, modern day development in Dhaka has not looked to build on these characteristics. Instead, we have distanced from them. We have grown obsessed with building upwards, and maximising usage out of every parcel of land. Right now, the most profitable usage seems to be to rent floor space out to restaurants, who will take every opportunity to circumvent safety regulations that are too expensive or cumbersome. The authorities may be able to regulate this, and bring some discipline back, but it does not address the underlying issue that has led to this unnatural status quo.

Wouldn't it be nice if Dhaka residents had a few more options for recreation that didn't involve eating? Safety can be addressed head on, or the underlying causes of the lack of safety can be addressed, resulting in the adoption of some drastic changes that have a long-lasting positive effect. Right now, Dhaka is being held together with pins and bandages. Our city desperately needs some long-term cures.

When will sanity return to our roads?



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ABMUDDIN

I, along with my wife and two kids, visited Bangladesh for the first time in 15 years last December. Everything that I had heard about road and infrastructure development in the country while living in the US betrayed me as soon as I started towards my destination in Bashabo from the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. The traffic jam was hellish. I took an Uber the next day, and I wanted to jump out of the vehicle as the driver sped through traffic, and my heart kept leaping out of my chest. It was a constant nightmare to be on the road.

While traveling home from Dhaka, my rental car almost flew off the road after it hit the divider. That mishap could have resulted in a fatal accident, but miraculously we were unhurt. We were about head-on with a truck on another trip when our microbus rolled in front of it suddenly. Because of the menace on the road, I decided to cancel many of the trips I had initially planned.

My nightmare came true when two

of my family members got badly injured while their CNG driver was driving recklessly a couple of weeks ago. The driver is now dead, but my four-year-old nephew, who was a passenger, was left covered in blood. He was rushed to a hospital where he received stitches all over his head. I wonder how horrific it was for that four-year-old boy to go through that!

In the US, driving under the influence (DUI) causes a large number of deaths every year—13,490 DUI-related deaths of all 40,000 fatalities from road accidents in 2023. Alcohol consumption in Bangladesh is illegal, and unlike the US, it does not have a national DUI crisis. So, how ironic is it to have so many senseless deaths on our roads? Mind you, the US has twice the population as Bangladesh and many times more vehicles.

The US's much lower road fatality rate is due to its safe driving laws and their rigorous application. When at fault, you must take responsibility and not leave the scene until the police

arrive or you will face felony charges. Roads are well maintained, and traffic rules are followed. In Bangladesh, there is almost no accountability for the drivers at fault. Fatalities often result in deaths; those who make it to survive are left on their own to deal with the consequences of callous driving. Many bear medical expenses and physical trauma for the rest of their lives

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without getting compensated for the harm. Lawlessness and anarchy on the road are unnerving, but we seem to have become numb to the daily tragedies.

Egregiously, there are no lanes whatsoever on many roads, giving drivers reckless freedom to manoeuvre, jeopardising lives. Many streets are wide enough to create multi-lane traffic, but there is none. The vehicles run inches apart. Those behind the wheel hardly feel that their lives are at risk because of their callousness.

I saw rickshaw handles knocked

over by a passing truck, while the rickshaw puller looked mindlessly. The trucker left as if nothing happened, or maybe he was clueless about what took place. I saw a motorbike driver get knocked down on the road by a car and trying to get back up from under his vehicle to get going. One bus rubbed off the back of another bus defacing it without, luckily, anyone getting hurt.

All the cases above would have involved police, insurance, medical attention, and even arrest if they occurred in the US. However, in Bangladesh, these occurrences seemed to be commonplace. Frightened, my daughters, 14 and 9, who were in Bangladesh for the first time, often recoiled in their seats with their eyes shut during our travels.

We cannot let the lunacy on our roads run amok. Our lives matter. The drivers, passengers, and pedestrians who lose their lives in road accidents matter. It is time to stop such nonsense on our roads.

We do not need new legislation. What we need is strict implementation of our existing regulations, and many of them are very good.

There is a commonly held claim that truck drivers are the real monsters when it comes to road accidents. However, I found that the cars, CNGs, and microbuses that I booked were at fault as well. Therefore, all drivers, when they are at fault, must equally be held accountable.