FROM SYLHET TO THE WORLD

Bangladesh's contribution to maternal and newborn health



PROF ABDULLAH H BAQUI



More than a decade ago, 3,000 pregnant women in Sylhet joined a study that followed them through pregnancy and childbirth. They gave blood and other samples and shared information about their health and their babies. Their contributions built a resource that is helping explain why babies are born too soon or too small, why some are stillborn, and why mothers develop complications.

A biobank stores biological samples linked to health information. Its value grows as science advances: blood collected years ago can now be examined using tools once unavailable or unaffordable. Because samples were collected before pregnancy outcomes were known, researchers can look for early warning signs and clues to how complications develop.

This is especially valuable in low- and middle-income countries, where pregnancy complications are most common, but research resources are limited. Studying local populations helps ensure that future tests and treatments address the needs of women and babies at greatest risk.

The Sylhet study was part of the Alliance for Maternal and Newborn Health Improvement (AMANHI), supported by the Gates Foundation and coordinated by the World Health Organization. Johns Hopkins University led the Bangladesh study with Bangladeshi partners through the Projahnmo research platform. The samples and linked data are housed at Projahnmo Research Foundation, with duplicate samples at North South University for safekeeping.

Similar AMANHI biobanks in Pakistan and Tanzania used common methods, allowing comparisons across populations. AMANHI helped lay the foundation for the Multi-Omics for Mothers and Infants (MOMI) Consortium, covering more than 24,000 pregnancies across South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Researchers study proteins, nutrients, and other substances together to understand pregnancy complications.

Early findings are encouraging. Two blood proteins shown to help predict premature birth in the United States also helped identify women at higher risk in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Tanzania. Adding other proteins improved prediction, suggesting that some warning signs may be shared across populations. Another study found lower levels of a blood fat involved in placental development and fetal growth among women whose babies were later born smaller than expected, offering clues about poor growth in the womb. These findings need confirmation before they can become routine tests. MOMI enables researchers to check whether discoveries hold across populations, with the goal of detecting risks early enough to prevent complications or improve treatment.

Behind every sample are years of work by Bangladeshi researchers and staff, and the trust of participating families. Preserving this resource requires reliable storage, ethical oversight, and investment in local scientific leadership. Young researchers need opportunities to develop laboratory and data analysis skills. International partnerships should strengthen these skills, support shared leadership, and ensure that samples and data are used responsibly for public benefit.

Bangladesh should take pride in this contribution and invest in its future so that discoveries lead to better health and save the lives of mothers and babies worldwide.

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Barbados stops HIV passing from mothers to babies: Lessons for Bangladesh

A baby born free from HIV is no longer just a hope in Barbados. It is now a remarkable public health achievement, offering valuable lessons for Bangladesh.

On 30 October 2026, the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced that Barbados had eliminated mother-to-child transmission of HIV as a public health problem.

Between 2022 and 2024, the Caribbean nation reported no new HIV infections passed from mothers to newborns. The secret? Accessible healthcare, early testing and timely treatment.

An impressive 98 per cent of pregnant women received pregnancy care, 98 per cent underwent HIV testing, and 98 per cent of expectant mothers living with HIV received treatment.

Crucially, Barbados provides free HIV testing and treatment to pregnant women, regardless of nationality, while protecting their privacy and dignity.

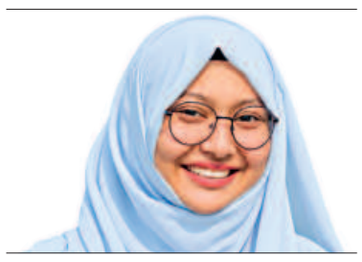
For Bangladesh, the message is powerful. Strengthening routine HIV screening during pregnancy, ensuring uninterrupted treatment and reaching mothers in rural and underserved communities could prevent avoidable infections.

Equally important is tackling stigma, which often discourages women from seeking help. Barbados demonstrates that protecting newborns requires more than medicine. It demands political commitment, affordable services and compassionate care.

Every child deserves a healthy beginning. Bangladesh can turn that promise into reality through sustained investment and action.



The forgotten health struggles of Dhaka's Bihari community



HASANAH FARHAT

In the heart of Dhaka, where hospitals, pharmacies and clinics seem to be everywhere, some communities still struggle to access even the most basic healthcare. For families living in the Bihari camp in Kalshi, Mirpur 12, falling ill can mean choosing between buying medicine and putting food on the table.

For decades, the largely Urdu-speaking Bihari community has faced social and economic hardship. Although many residents gained Bangladeshi citizenship following a landmark court ruling in 2008, access to healthcare, clean water, proper housing and stable employment remains a daily struggle.



A resident explained the difficulties families face during emergencies, particularly at night when they need medicine. But the challenges extend far beyond medicine.

Overcrowded homes, inadequate sanitation and unreliable water supplies create conditions where illness can spread easily. Residents often queue for water, making something as simple as maintaining personal hygiene an exhausting daily task.

For families surviving on low wages or irregular earnings, seeking treatment presents another dilemma. Transport costs, consultation fees and medicines can quickly become unaffordable. Missing work because of illness means losing precious income, pushing households further into financial insecurity.

The consequences are particularly concerning for children, older people and those requiring regular medical attention. When healthcare is delayed because of financial hardship, manageable illnesses may become more serious.

Occasional charitable assistance offers temporary relief, but residents need lasting solutions rather than short-lived promises.

Affordable neighbourhood accessible clinics, safe drinking water and improved sanitation could significantly ease their difficulties. Better housing, education and employment opportunities are equally important because good health begins long before someone enters a hospital.

The situation in Kalshi raises an uncomfortable question: What does healthcare access truly mean when the people who need it the most cannot afford to reach it?

For Bangladesh, ensuring healthcare for marginalised communities is not merely about building more hospitals. It is about creating a society where someone's address, income or background does not determine their chance of living a healthy life.

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Dhaka, let's go outside: Three days of wellness, music and mindfulness

In a city where traffic, deadlines and endless screen time often leave little room to breathe, Dhaka residents were invited to rediscover wellbeing beneath the open sky.

The Flow Fest returned for its fifth edition with Winter Wellness, a three-day celebration from November 12–14 at Fortis Platinum Lounge in Jolshiri.

Founded by Shazia Omar, the Bangladesh-born wellness initiative aims to make healthier living accessible beyond expensive gyms and exclusive retreats.

Under the campaign "Dhaka, let's go outside", visitors explored yoga, meditation, dance, martial arts, fitness challenges and discussions on mental health, nutrition, women's wellbeing and workplace stress.

Beyond exercise, the festival offered live music, storytelling, children's activities, poetry, creative workshops and a vibrant marketplace featuring local businesses.

Visitors enjoyed picnics, horseback riding and outdoor activities while discovering simple ways to incorporate relaxation, movement and meaningful connections into everyday life.

Shazia believes seeking help should be recognised as courage rather than weakness, while wellbeing should be a way of life, not a luxury.

For Dhaka's weary residents, this was a refreshing reminder that wellbeing sometimes begins by simply stepping outside.

When parents' stress becomes a child's burden



AISHI DASTIDAR

In Bangladesh, examination season often turns homes into pressure cookers. As school finals and admission tests approach, children are not the only ones losing sleep. Parents, anxious about grades, competition and prestigious schools, may unknowingly pass their worries on to their children.

What begins as concern for a child's future can gradually become a source of fear.

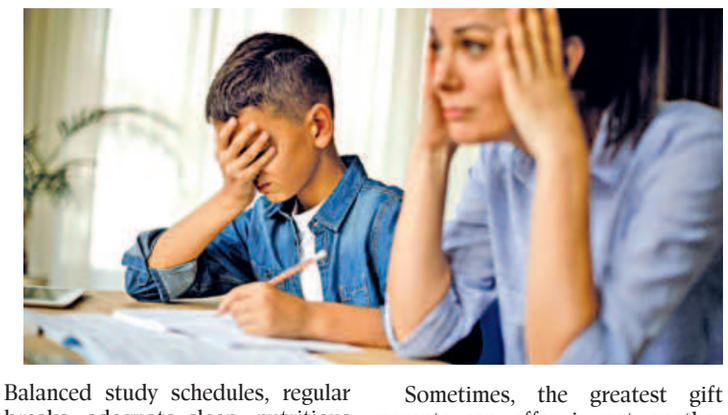
For many children, examinations no longer feel like opportunities to demonstrate learning. Instead, they become tests of whether they are good enough to earn parental approval.

Constant reminders to study, comparisons with classmates and disappointment over marks can quietly damage a child's confidence. A child appearing lazy or distracted may actually be frightened, exhausted or overwhelmed.

Parents rarely intend to cause harm. Their anxiety often comes from genuine love and the belief that academic success guarantees a secure future. Yet good intentions do not always produce healthy outcomes.

The answer is not abandoning expectations but replacing pressure with encouragement.

A calm conversation can achieve more than repeated criticism.



Balanced study schedules, regular breaks, adequate sleep, nutritious meals and time for recreation help children remain focused without feeling trapped.

Parents should also remember that admission to a renowned school does not guarantee happiness, confidence or future success. Similarly, disappointing examination results reveal areas needing support, not a child's worth.

Most importantly, children must know that parental love is not conditional upon academic achievement.

Sometimes, the greatest gift parents can offer is not another study guide, but a peaceful home where mistakes are allowed and encouragement comes before expectations.

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POST-MEAL WALKING

The simplest health habit you are overlooking



What if one of the easiest ways to improve your health begins just after putting down your dinner plate?

In Bangladesh, where rice dominates meals and sitting down afterwards is common, a short walk could make a surprising difference.

Research suggests that walking for just two to five minutes after eating can help prevent sharp rises in blood sugar. When we move, our muscles use some of the sugar circulating in our blood, helping the body manage it more effectively.

A 2022 review published in the journal Sports Medicine found that light walking after meals improved blood sugar levels compared with prolonged sitting.

The benefits extend beyond blood sugar. Gentle movement may ease feelings of fullness, support digestion and help people break long periods of inactivity.

The best part? No gym membership, expensive equipment or exhausting workout is required.

Walk around your home, take a stroll along the corridor or step outside after lunch. Even five to ten minutes can be worthwhile. Aim for a comfortable pace rather than vigorous exercise immediately after eating.

For people managing diabetes, regular post-meal walks can complement, but never replace, prescribed treatment.

Sometimes, better health does not demand dramatic changes. It simply asks us to take a few steps.