

GEMS LOST TO THE COVID-19

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*"And whoever saves a life, it is as though he had saved
the lives of all mankind" (Al-Quran; 5:32).*

How encouraging is this verse of Holy Quran for the doctors and health care workers all over the world, who have saved the lives of so many in this difficult period of COVID-19. So many others have lost their own lives in this struggle to save humanity. Since the end of 2019, the world has been going through difficult times. However, this is not a new phenomenon that a deadly disease has led to the loss of precious lives and properties. In the last century, there were many pandemics, which resulted in massive destruction. Influenza pandemic of 1918 (Spanish flu) was the deadliest with a record of approximately one third of the population affected and at least 50 million deaths.¹ Asian flu of 1957 was another lethal pandemic, which took one to two million lives. One to two million deaths were recorded in Hong Kong flu of 1968. Swine flu hit the world in 2009 with 12,469 casualties. Recently, COVID-19 has resulted in 232,608,243 cases and 4,932,810 deaths.²

In any pandemic, there is an extraordinary burden on doctors and healthcare workers. They are the front-line warriors in its true sense. This Pandemic was unique in this regard as the first doctor who alarmed the world

about the expected pandemic; himself was infected and died due to this disease. He was an ordinary ophthalmologist but had an extraordinary insight to predict the coming situation and warned the world on December 30, 2019.³ Authorities for un-necessarily causing panic silenced him but after his death, he was regarded as a hero.

This loss of precious life-saving hero was not the only one. Later on, it became a routine to hear some doctor or health care worker dying of COVID-19 across the world. Only in Pakistan, by June 2020, 5,367 healthcare professionals were affected by the virus, which constituted approximately 3% of the corona-affected population of the country. Among these 61% were the doctors (3,275) and 27% (1,453) were paramedics.⁴ According to Pakistan Medical Association, on 29th November 2020, six of the ten affected doctors lost their lives on a single day and around 3,000 health workers were in isolation across the country. More than 11,000 health workers in Pakistan had contracted COVID-19 and at least 165 of them had been killed by the virus by the end of year 2020.⁵

Death of so many health professionals increased burden on these rescue angels, which was further aggravated by so many others who were in isolation. This increase in ratio of doctors to the patients further complicated the situation. The lockdown amplified the existing adverse condition. The doctors and other health care professionals had to work harder. They had long duty hours, no places to relax and no proper safety facilities. All these led to a large number of health professionals to become victims of this deadly disease. There were no risk allowances rather in some areas their regular salaries were delayed. This was further complicated by the failing health facilities. Facemasks grew shorter.

There were no PPE but doctors had to work to save the lives at any cost. There were cases where these dedicated people had to wear the same mask for many days. At this peak time of disaster, the hoarders of the society came into the scene. With already short facemasks and other protective equipment, these people created an artificial shortage of the protective equipment. The story did not end here. On one hand, the protective measures were scanty and on the other hand, those who were constantly using the masks for more than twenty-four hours of their duties, suffered injuries to the face, ears and nose. Wearing PPE in hot and humid climate was a challenge in itself. Psychological trauma caused by seeing patients dying of the disease every now and then is yet another untold story.

The situation was extremely challenging, as this was a new virus, nobody knew about its implications. Hit and trial was going on and the doctors, healthcare workers and researchers had to sacrifice themselves to save the lives of the others affected. Some had been living a retired life but came out to help the ailing humanity. They risked their own families. One example was a medical student Salman Tahir, who was living in lockdown conditions but acquired infection through his parents who were doctors and serving the humanity. There were doctors who did not meet their families because of the danger of spreading infection to the family.

There are many other examples which are heart touching. One of them was a young doctor, Osama Riaz, who caught the disease by screening people coming back from Iran. He contracted the virus and lost his life to save so many others. Another example from Pakistan was Vice Chancellor of Nishtar Medical University Mustafa Kamal. He was a surgeon and dedicated worker but became a victim of this monster. These are just few examples from Pakistan. Doctors all over the world had been very devoted to the humanity. A Chinese doctor had postponed his marriage for this cause and died a COVID hero. In India, according to one report, 798 doctors died during the second wave.⁶

The situation was not different in the West. According to Guardian report of April 2020, many of the NHS staff died from COVID and the families had complained that there were no effective measures to save doctors from acquiring this deadly infection.⁷ With all these problems faced by the health professionals, in many countries respect for the doctors increased. People expressed their love to these selfless workers in many different ways. Social media networks were full of messages of support, praise and gratitude. However, the situation in the third world countries like Pakistan remained pathetic. People blamed doctors for these deaths, attacked and harmed

them. A portion of the population is still in the state of denial even after the fourth wave. Rumors were spread and one of the most popular was that doctors get money to kill the patients with some kind of injectable medicine. This was only one example. This forced the governments of the third world countries to take steps to safeguard the health professionals. In India a law was passed, according to which seven years of imprisonment was ordered in case someone took law into hands by attacking medical personnel.⁸ Implementation of such laws is the challenge. Despite all these odds, doctors are trying their best to work for humanity, forgetting their comfort, deprived of sleep yet making their patients rest comfortably. War is not yet over. Time has come to support these saviors, ethically, morally and socially.

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