



To be or not to be: That's the question

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There are times when I sit in my chamber in the “Fauji ” atmosphere where I think about my Residency days at AIIMS , New Delhi in the Department of Hospital Administration. One particular episode does send a chill down the spine and makes me believe , we doctors too can shatter at times and we too may need help.

It was just another hectic day in the control room of the Covid Hospital of a tertiary care Hospital in New Delhi . The authorities had recently given orders for the conversion of this entire hospital to a COVID hospital and the task was completed in a short span of time to receive and treat those patients who were triaged Red. If my memory goes right, it was probably the 4th or 5th day after the conversion and there were lots of gaps in what we knew about this dynamic disease and the way it was spreading and behaving.

Loads of work or fear of the same is something which an Armed Forces Officer is never afraid of. Me as a Sponsored Junior Resident of the Department of Hospital Administration and basically a soldier of the world's largest ParaMilitary – the Border Security Force, I was juggling between phone calls, files, and a hot cup of coffee which had already been warmed thrice and then that phone rang.....

The phone that was the beginning of a long silence and a quiet shriek and a turmoil which I had to face the entire day. Thankfully I came out of it soon.

The Gynaecology Resident Doctor from the COVID OT , who incidentally was my buddy in the hostel, where I stayed for a few days (till my parent organisation – BSF, allotted me quarters) identified me and said, Patient X had just delivered a female baby, 2.5 kg healthy, LSCS and no complications to mother and child as of now. Birth time of the baby was 6:34 pm. Simultaneously, I received another phone call regarding the death of a patient, who incidentally was also named X , who was suffering from CKD-V with Covid, 35 years of age and was declared dead after all attempts of revival failed at 6:32 pm.

As residents of Hospital Administration, pursuing MD, we manage the control room wherein this room acts as a one stop location for solution or elixir of all problems in the hospital. That is the command which the control room attracts. The doctors managing it were called as Duty Officers. And to say it with pride, the control room does its best to stay upto this expectation.

This was the period of the first wave of the dreadful COVID-19 pandemic. Literature was new, confusing and at times contradicting to each other. The only thing that was consistent and in fact increasing was Fear – Fear of the unknown.

During the episodes of COVID, it was the Duty Officer who informed deaths and other information regarding the patients to the relatives. Though Prognostication was informed by the treating doctors, events which required immediate information couldn't wait for the doctors to doff and come out and inform. Hence we, the Duty officers formed a conduit between the treating doctors and the relatives. As administrators we are also trained in communication skill and soft skills and I thought it wouldn't be a difficult job. That's when I noticed similar names of both the patients, almost same age, and one died and the other has recently become a mother. One thing that I had to bear in mind is to follow the correct patient identification (1-3). Following various principles, regarding the same, I went ahead and called the husband of the deceased and went ahead and informed him about the sad demise of his wife. Since he was aware of her prognosis he was strong though shattered and held his two children in his arms and said "Now who will take care of them?" After allowing him to grieve, I escorted him out and called for the husband of the other MS X and informed him about the bundle of joy who had joined his family. His joy knew no bounds. After a few minutes, the security guard informed me that the husbands of both Ms X had come together to meet me and when I went out, they both said in Unison , "Can we have a look at my wife / my daughter?"

That, was the start of an eerie silence when both of them stared at each other and later at me, as if why are you snatching my dialogues.

That was the time when to combat infections the dead bodies were packed and handed over to the relatives to be taken to the cremation / burial ground. Though on a later date the norms changed and the bodies were being shown to the relatives after taking due care.

Now, here I was torn with no answer, one wanting to see his dead wife and the other wanted to see a new mother and both the ladies having the same name. Seeing both the extremes of life in one frame and two extremes of emotions, did waver me for a moment. There are goosebumps, even today when I re-see that dreaded scene. But as an administrator, a soldier and a doctor combined all in one, I knew that was not a place to show my emotions. It was a place where the decision had to be quick and firm. Had to take a call and use technology and video calling facilities(4) to show one man his life partner who was no more and another who was going to start a new journey of his life with his life partner.

But the disturbing scene, the silence after the question posed by both the gentlemen and the fear and joy in one pair of eyes and the fear and grief in the other, was like seeing the various spectrum of life at the same moment.

I am sure, many doctors would have faced similar situations and there is nothing wrong in seeking professional help in such cases. At our Medical College , have a robust student welfare centre, where counselling and other professional help is given to doctor's who face such dilemmas in life. Interventions to maintain the emotional and psychological health of the doctors was very important during the COVID pandemic. (5-6).

Though it's been about more than two years into the incident and I could immediately maintain my composure after that incident , But at times , I do wonder how come the child to lady X was born in the same hospital at about the same time , when another lady by the same name died a few minutes ago. But then whenever it dawned during my rest of the residency, I would shake myself and think that I need to submit my Thesis to my guide for his comments and not to ponder on such thoughts.

I was always reminded that there is ample time to reach Maslow's 5th stage of Self – Actualisation and what is now important, is to complete my residency satisfactorily.

But then COVID taught me a new lesson : However strong we are , we doctors too have a heart and we too suffer from stress and burnout and taking professional help in such a time, is not wrong.

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