



Reflections

When Compassion Meets Conflict

Shabnam Naveed

On a hot summer day in Ramadan 2020, I reported on the evening shift as a senior doctor at the COVID-19 unit. The air was heavy with the scorching heat and an overwhelming sense of fear and exhaustion. It was only my second day of duty in the ward, but fasting and the uncertainty of the pandemic made the already demanding shift even harder. However, what awaited me was something far beyond the challenges I had prepared for.

The Incident

The COVID-19 unit was packed with critically ill patients. With every passing hour, we watched the patients fighting for their lives. Our hearts were burdened by the emotional weight of the situation and the knowledge that there was no definitive treatment. Each breath we took inside that ward carried the risk of infection, yet we carried on, determined to serve those in need. The N95 mask and every layer of PPE clung to our bodies, intensifying the heat, while the fear of catching infection haunted us.

Despite our best efforts, we lost 3 patients that day. It wasn't unexpected as their condition had deteriorated over a couple of days. The last expiry occurred just before Iftar time and with heavy heart, we informed the family or so we thought. However, amid the chaos of the ward, a devastating miscommunication occurred: one team member mistakenly conveyed that the patient was alive and recovering. It was a tragic error, driven by the frenzy of managing multiple emergencies simultaneously.

When the correct information was finally conveyed, it was too late. The patient's attendants, who had clung to hope, felt betrayed. Their grief turned into fury and they started accusing us of negligence and lying to them. Within moments, a mob formed. Doors were slammed open as the mob stormed into the unit, ready to confront the doctors who, in their eyes, had taken their loved one from them.

Their faces were twisted in rage, and their eyes burned with betrayal. What started as confused demands for clarity quickly became loud accusations of negligence and lies. At that moment, my mind raced, where could



we go? The entrance was blocked, and there was no back door to escape. Upstairs, rooms were filled with COVID patients struggling for breath. The walls around us seemed to close in, trapping us with no way out. The knot of fear tightened in my chest. Would we survive? The angry crowd seemed ready to break us; emotionally, physically, and completely. Doctors and nursing staff stood together, trying to shield one another. The male colleagues stood firm, shouting, gripping IV stands, using them as makeshift defenses to hold off the raging mob. The thought flashed through my mind: This might be it. This is how it all ends, not from the virus, but at the hands of those we're trying to help.

Eventually, senior hospital management and police arrived to intervene swiftly, and the crowd was dispersed. When it was over, my heart raced long after the chaos ended. We were alive. But something inside me had shifted, a growing realization that this was not just an isolated incident, but a glaring reminder of how fragile safety and trust are in healthcare.

Safety Issues for Healthcare Workers

This harrowing experience forced me to confront an unfortunate reality: healthcare workers are often on the frontline without adequate safety measures. In a crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of safety becomes more pronounced. Physical infrastructure, such as secure entry and exit points, emergency response protocols, and trained security staff, is often insufficient. We had no panic buttons, alarms, or safe spaces to retreat to during the incident.

Beyond the physical infrastructure, there was also a lack of psychological safety. Health workers risk their lives daily in environments where violent outbursts are increasingly common. The emotional toll of these unsafe work conditions can lead to burnout, stress, and even fear of returning to duty. Constant exposure to trauma, grief, and violence takes a heavy toll on mental well-being. As healthcare providers, we need both institutional support and personal safety measures to perform our duties effectively.

The Importance of Effective Communication

Another key factor in the escalation of the incident was poor communication. The attendants had been given conflicting information about the patient's status, leading to misunderstanding and anger. Effective communication is crucial in any healthcare setting, particularly during crises, not just between doctors and patients, but also within the healthcare teams. Clear, accurate communication is essential, especially in high-stakes environments with high emotional involvement.

Transparent, empathetic communication can prevent misunderstandings that might escalate into dangerous situations. In this case, the tragedy could have been avoided if the correct information had been relayed promptly and clearly. It was a stark reminder that healthcare is about clinical expertise and ensuring that patients and their families are properly informed and emotionally supported, especially during their loss.

Lessons Learned and the Way Forward

This experience has changed the way I view my role as a doctor. It taught me the importance of being prepared for medical challenges especially unexpected crises that could arise from communication breakdowns or inadequate safety protocols. Hospitals need to prioritize the safety of their staff by investing in better infrastructure, developing robust emergency protocols, and training personnel to handle conflicts calmly.

At the same time, healthcare professionals must learn to communicate more effectively. This means ensuring to convey accurate information to patients and their families fostering teamwork within our departments. Mutual trust among team members and clear communication can prevent many crises from escalating.

Conclusion

Looking back, that incident serves as a painful yet profound reminder of the challenges healthcare workers face, especially during times of uncertainty. It underscored the need for healthcare systems to protect their staff and equip them with the tools and skills necessary to manage crises. Safety and communication are not secondary concerns, they are essential components of healthcare delivery.

I continue my work with a renewed sense of purpose, but the experience has left me more mindful of the fragility of trust between healthcare providers and the public. As I strive to provide care to my patients, I now also advocate for safer working conditions and better communication practices—so that no other healthcare worker must endure what my colleagues and I went through that day.