

Correspondence

Covid warriors: A tag of pride or prejudice?

The Second World War saw Nazi forces ravage through Europe, spreading gloom, anxiety, fear, anger and uncertainty. During the 'Blitz', Nazi air bombers targeted industries in major British cities, causing civilian casualties. The people of Great Britain responded by supporting their warriors by ferrying the warring soldiers on private boats and providing the returning soldiers with food and shelter. The civilians did not blame their soldiers for 'bringing the war home'.

Ever since the threat posed by the Covid-19 pandemic was identified, eminent personalities and governments across the world have repeatedly likened the situation to a 'war'.^{1,2} Healthcare professionals (HCPs) have been christened 'soldiers of humankind' to joust against the seemingly invisible yet tangible enemy. However, this 'war' is not the first that 'medicine' has faced. In fact, the philosophical genesis of medical science was quintessentially to fight against the many faces of one enemy—'ill health'. This war has never truly ceased. Moreover, HCPs have never paused to recover their breath. Warriors as they may be, the risk that comes with facing the enemy up close is real. In times of uncertainty though, this hazard further perturbs the already-encumbered mind of HCPs. Consequently, fear and anxiety are unavoidable human emotions that HCPs have to deal with, especially because of their proximity to the 'enemy'.

Incidents of HCPs in India facing mental and physical abuse from the general public have happened quite regularly, even during the pandemic. From getting physically beaten while buying groceries to losing access to their own homes, from not being allowed to cross borders to reach their hospitals to being physically abused while rendering community health services, from being pelted at with stones to being unapologetically spat at; the examples are aplenty.³⁻⁷ Incidents like these are truly appalling. Soldiers should not have to fight the enemy and then be pelted with stones by the people they are trying to protect.

The temperament of people involved in abusive incidents against HCPs is repugnant. As a social community, people need to remind themselves who the real enemy is; 'disease', 'illness', 'ill health' or whatever name we might give it.

Violence against the medical fraternity is not new. A cross-sectional study of 169 doctors in a tertiary care facility in Delhi, India, reported physical or verbal abuse in at least 40%.⁸ Addressing workplace abuse, the government has taken some measures such as increasing the number of nursing and medical graduates and postgraduates.⁹ Even though these efforts mark a step in the right direction, much more needs to be done. However, certain factors are beyond government control such as the negative image repeatedly created by a viewership hungry media, and a psyche towards aggression with which people approach public health institutions. The toxic mental environment that is thus created, in overly burdened public hospitals, becomes the breeding grounds for frustration and anger, which are eventually vented by the kin on the treating doctors. To curtail violence against HCPs, the Central Government reinforced the prevailing laws by amending the National Epidemic Diseases Act, with an aim to provide legal protection.¹⁰ However, effective enforcement of any legal act requires 'action' in addition to the 'written' word. The true effectiveness of any and all measures can be judged only if we have an accurate and official log of all cases of workplace abuse involving HCPs across the country, in both public and private sectors. Equally,

such a record is also essential for a precise analysis of the trend of such cases.

The lack of an official record has led to patchy availability of data of abuse against HCPs. Even during the current health crisis, cases of mistreatment of HCPs continue to happen, despite all government efforts. Is it because of a mentality of 'doing the deed and getting away with it'? Public sensitization addressing the detestable abuse and unnecessary ostracism hurled at HCPs, even as they tirelessly work to protect the same public from the threat of past, present or future enemies, would go a long way.

Quoting the philosopher and author, G.K. Chesterton, 'the soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him'. These words serve as a reminder to the 'why' behind the selfless work of HCPs all over the world, both during a pandemic and otherwise. In the face of repulsive acts of a few, the charm behind the 'love' is imperilled. In the war against disease, saving 'man' would not mean victory, if it came at the cost of losing 'humanity'.

Conflicts of interest. None declared

REFERENCES

- 1 World Health Organization. World Health Organization Director-General calls on G20 to Fight, Unite, and Ignite against COVID-19. Available at www.who.int/news-room/detail/26-03-2020-who-s-director-general-calls-on-g20-to-fight-unite-and-ignite-against-covid-19 (accessed on 12 May 2020).
- 2 Reuters. 'Never give up, never despair': Queen praises Britons on VE Day. Available at www.reuters.com/article/us-ww2-anniversary-britain-victory-day-q/never-give-up-never-despair-queen-praises-britons-on-ve-day-idUSKBN2K2QX (accessed on 12 May 2020).
- 3 India.com. Two doctors of Delhi's Safdarjung hospital assaulted while buying grocery, case filed. Available at www.india.com/news/india/two-doctors-of-safdarjung-hospital-assaulted-while-buying-grocery-case-filed-3994665/ (accessed on 12 May 2020).
- 4 CNN. Doctors evicted from their homes in India as fear spreads amid coronavirus lockdown. Available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/25/asia/india-coronavirus-doctors-discrimination-intl-hnk/index.html> (accessed on 12 May 2020).
- 5 The New Indian Express. NCR border restrictions affecting healthcare workers' morale, says doctors association. Available at www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2020/apr/30/ncr-border-restrictions-affecting-healthcare-workers-morale-says-doctors-association-2137297.html (accessed on 12 May 2020).
- 6 Bloomberg. Doctors come under attack in india as coronavirus stigma grows. Available at www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-13/doctors-come-under-attack-in-india-as-coronavirus-stigma-grows (accessed on 12 May 2020).
- 7 The Eurasian Times. I am injured, not scared: doctors under immense attack in India. Available at <https://eurasianimes.com/i-am-injured-not-scared-doctors-under-intense-attack-in-india/> (accessed on 12 May 2020).
- 8 Anand T, Grover S, Kumar R, Kumar M, Ingle GK. Workplace violence against resident doctors in a tertiary care hospital in Delhi. *Natl Med J India* 2016;**29**: 344-8.
- 9 Kar SP. Addressing underlying causes of violence against doctors in India. *Lancet* 2017;**389**:1979-80.
- 10 Press Information Bureau. Government of India. Promulgation of an Ordinance to amend the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 in the light of the pandemic situation of COVID-19. Available at <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=202493> (accessed on 12 May 2020).

Nipun Malhotra

Nitesh Gupta

Pranav Ish

pranavish2512@gmail.com

Department of Pulmonary, Critical Care and Sleep Medicine
Vardhman Mahavir Medical College and Safdarjung Hospital
New Delhi