

Kumudini in Public Health

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that social determinants can have a greater impact on public health. In this article, the author briefly describes the role of Kumudini Welfare Trust of Bengal in public health. In this connection, the author cites the different types of infectious and non-infectious diseases which human society has faced so far. The author also notes the various systems of medicine such as ancient Indian Ayurveda, Arabic Unani, modern Allopathic, and Homeopathy. Finally, the author points out that people in Bangladesh are increasingly turning to easily accessible homeopathic remedies, as well as ancient Ayurveda and Unani practices, which are affordable and free of side effects.

1. INTRODUCTION

A remarkable stage of human civilization, Ascetic-Saints tried to know the mystery of the creation of the universe and its creator. From very ancient times, the physical sciences of India, including present-day Bangladesh, have been practiced especially in medicine to treat diseases. Evidence of this practice was found in Manu-Sanghita. Indian Ascetics successfully discovered and used various types of medicinal plants for relief from diseases (Petrovska, 2012).

Hence the ancient name of medical science of this region is Ayurveda. Ayurveda is also called the Vedic or Indian system of medicine.

Another significant branch of the ancient medical system is Unani. Greek physician Hippocrates (460-370 BC) is the father of this treatment (Yapijakis, 2009). He believed that the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical imbalances are the main causes of diseases, and maintaining these balances is the main goal of treatment. He was the first person to lay the foundation of the rational system of medicine and identified the different diseases as acute, chronic, endemic, and epidemic. In the late eighteenth century, throughout the nineteenth century, and the first half of the twentieth century, the entire Indian-subcontinent including present-day Bangladesh was under the control of British rule. On one hand, majority of the people of this land were poor, illiterate, superstitious, and ignorant and on the other hand they were neglected by the British government. Cold, cough, and fever were their constant companion. In addition, Plague, Cholera, Influenza, Spanish flu, Asian flu, Tuberculosis, Malaria, Leprosy, Yellow and Black fever, Aids, SARS, Swine Flu, Ebola, Dengue, Zika virus, MARS, Chikungunia and the latest so far Covid-19 as infectious diseases have struck human society again and again in epidemic form. During the period from 1400 to 1700, numerous lives were lost to communicable diseases, putting humanity in a precarious situation (Shaw-Taylor, 2020). These terrible pictures of the epidemic have repeatedly appeared in our literature, history, and memory. Moreover, non-communicable diseases many such as cancer, diabetes, blood pressure, typhoid, heart diseases, kidney problems, as well as prostate, eye, nose, ear, throat, etc. related diseases have also affected humanity.

Until the early part of the twentieth century, public welfare, especially public health was completely neglected by British rulers in India. During this period, prominent figures like Deshbandhu Chittarangan Das, Dr. Bhidhan Chandra Roy, the founder of Kumudini Welfare Trust of Bengal, Rai Bhahadur Ranada Prasad Shaha, Founder of Sakti Medicine, Mathura Mohan Chakraborty, founder of Sadhana medicine, Principal Jogesh Chandra Ghosh, founder of Kundeshari medicine, Nutun Chandra Singha, Hakeem Mohammad Saeed, the youngest son of Hakeem Hafiz Abdul Majeed, the promoter of Unani, etc. played significant roles in public health throughout the undivided Bengal. Today, in Bangladesh, Hakeem Mohammad Yusuf Haroon Bhuiyan continues to contribute to the spread of Unani medicine through the establishment of Hamdad Laboratory, Hamdad Foundation and Hamdad University. It is with profound regret that we remember the tragic events of the Liberation War in 1971, when the barbaric Pakistani army, aided by their local collaborators, brutally murdered Principal Jogesh Chandra Ghosh, Principal Nutun Chandra

Singha, and Rai Bahadur Ranada Prasad Shaha, along with his beloved son Bhabani Prasad Shaha. These courageous individuals, who stood as pillars of their communities, became victims of unspeakable atrocities. Although it came belatedly, the Bangladesh government has since honoured them with Martyr status and has taken steps to prosecute those responsible for their killings, recognizing their immense sacrifice for the nation.

2. ROLE OF KUMUDINI IN PUBLIC HEALTH

At the age of seven, Ranada Prasad Shaha experienced the devastating loss of his loving mother Kumudini Devi, who succumbed to tetanus infection following the tragic birth a stillborn child. Her death, due to inadequate medical care and treatment, left a profound impact on him. He then vowed that if he ever became wealthy, he would establish a hospital named after his mother so that no mother would die without treatment during childbirth.

At the age of 42, after overcoming many obstacles in life through hard work, dedication, honesty, and immense organization skills, he became a successful businessman. He amassed considerable wealth and became known as R. P. Shaha. Although he was a businessman by profession, he was a philanthropist. In 1938, he finally laid down the foundation stone of Kumudini Hospital, named after loving mother, at Mirzapur in Tangail subdivision. On the same day of the holy Rath Yatra in 1938, he established Shova Sundari Charitable Dispensary in honour of his grandmother. In this way, he fulfilled his long-cherished dream. A charitable dispensary is a hospital where medicines and medical services are provided free of charge. Its operations were initially managed by Dr. Abdur Rahman, a resident doctor of Mirzapur, and Pran Gopal Adhikary, a compounder. Within a very short time, R. P. Shaha appointed more doctors and compounders as needed.

Despite some delays due to World War II, the hospital officially opened on 27 July 1944 with a 20-bed maternity ward, which was inaugurated by the Governor of Bengal, Lord R. G. Casey. In his speech as the guest of honour, Lord Casey said:

“Some of you may wonder why I should take such close interest in a hospital that happens to be situated in a part of Bengal never visited by a Governor of the province. My answer to this is simple. I have come here today because I feel that this hospital affords a high example of what can be done when the initiative, enterprise, and public spirit of one man (R. P. Shaha) are directed towards the welfare and well-being of the community,” (Prakashani, 2013).

Within a short period, the hospital became a 750-bed general hospital which has now grown to 1050 beds. In 1943, a famine broke out in Bengal,

known as the Bengal's Fifties Famine as it happened in 1350 (Bengali year). His benevolent hand extended to numerous poor and hungry people, opening 275 Langarkhanas (community kitchens), and feeding them daily for eight months. At that time, due to lack of food and clean water, many rural people of Bengal were suffering from Cholera and lying on the roads. Many cholera patients, at risk of death, were treated and cured at the Shova Sundari dispensary. On 18 June 1944 R. P. Shaha was awarded the title of Rai Bahadur by the Governor General of India, Field Marshal Wavell in recognition of his service to humanity. On 31 July 1944, R. P. Shaha donated 250,000 rupees to the British Red Cross Appeal Fund in response to the request from Lord R. G. Casey, the Governor of Bengal. On his return to Calcutta, Lord Casey, recalling his visit to Mirzapur, sent a letter to R. P. Shaha, acknowledging his contribution to the British Red Cross during the Second World War II. The letter said:

“I was much impressed by what you have done and are continuing to do in the way of public welfare. The people of Tangail Subdivision may well be proud of you and grateful to you. Your magnificent donation of Rupees 2, 50,000 to the Red Cross Fund is a further instance in this most exceptional record of public service, and I know that many sick and wounded men of fighting services, who stand to benefit, will share my feelings of gratitude and appreciation,” (Prakashani, 2013).

Medical care in British India was neglected until the early twentieth century. Finally, in 1943, the British Government of India formed a committee, headed by Joseph William Bhore, known as the Bhore Commission, to improve public health services (Patel et. al,2011). In 1946, the Bhore Committee on the Improvement of Public Health made several recommendations that remain guiding principles for public health improvement today. Some key recommendations were ensuring access to clean water, developing the sanitation system, improving maternal health and women's healthcare during childbirth and treating infectious diseases like tuberculosis, leprosy, etc. Surprisingly, Kumudini Hospital had been implementing these four crucial recommendations of the Bhore Commission since 1944 i.e. two years before the commission's report. Therefore, R. P. Shaha may be regarded as the pioneer or father of public health in undivided Bengal.

In 1947 R. P. Shaha registered his entire property under the Kumudini Welfare Trust of Bengal (BD) Ltd. Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, was his best friend and the first external member of the Trust. His admiration for his friend can be understood from the following few words, which he wrote in the visitor's book during his visit to Kumudini Hospital on 6 April 1955:

“A poor man became a millionaire, and the millionaire voluntarily became a poor man, spending his all in the service of humanity, for the suffering and the distressed, for the furtherance of education, for rendering a service to the state, which the state itself has not undertaken. But if the Rai Bahadur is poor, he is rich in the esteem, in the affection, in the love of a grateful people. Having given all his worldly possessions, he has obtained more than those who were his peers. May the state and the people he has served so well give him that recognition which is his due, and not destroy the great institutions he has built with such love and devotion.” (Prakashani,2013).

In a short period, Kumudini Hospital’s reputation spread throughout Bengal for providing high quality medical services at no cost. Patients began coming from distant places. R. P. Shaha used to bring medicines and renowned doctors from abroad to treat them. Medical services in this hospital were provided by Dr. G. S. Jhanda, a surgeon known as “body artisan”, who was a member of the five-member medical board formed after the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy, the famous German doctor K. S. Saeedi, and many others. Besides, many distinguished doctors of the country, who have given medical services in this hospital were national Prof. Dr. A.B.N. Islam, who was the personal physician of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, surgeon Dr. Rashidul Islam, Dr. Badruddoza Chowdhury (former President of Bangladesh), ophthalmologist Dr. Alim Chowdhury (Liberation War Martyr), Radiologist Dr. Halim Chowdhury and Dr. T. Hossain and others.

In 1954, R. P. Shaha introduced free radiotherapy for cancer treatment at Kumudini Hospital. To ensure easy access to the best modern services in Cancer treatment, on 14th February 2021, the former Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina laid the foundation stone of Kumudini International Institute of Medical Sciences and Cancer Research (KIIMS CaRe) in Narayanganj, which is rapidly progressing today. KIIMS CaRe will have a 300-bed general hospital, a 50-bed cancer hospital, a nursing institute, a medical technology institute and a women’s medical college. Through this, the Kumudini Trust will go one step further in the service of humanity by offering international-standard medical care for cancer and other incurable diseases at an affordable cost within the country. In addition, this institute will play an effective role in the interest of the country by providing higher education and employment opportunities for students of Bangladesh in medical and research on health and treatment including cancer (Chandan, 2021). Recently, Kumudini Welfare Trust of Bengal (BD) Ltd organized an International conference named “International Cancer & Palliative Care Conference 2024” in collaboration with Simmons University and Massachusetts General Hospital, USA, where a large number of

delegates from home and abroad presented their valuable research papers on Cancer and Palliative care. This is a significant milestone for the Kumudini Welfare Trust in public health (Kumudini, 2024).

In the 1970s, tuberculosis (TB) was a deadly infectious disease that plagued rural Bangladesh. It was commonly said that “One who has tuberculosis has no protection,” and due to the high cost of treatment, the disease was also known as “Raj-Rog.” Referred to as the “white plague” for its highly contagious nature, tuberculosis posed a significant threat. In response, R. P. Shaha established a 50-bed tuberculosis ward in 1970 on boats anchored in the Louhajang River, safely away from populated areas. The ward was inaugurated by Justice Abu Saeed Chowdhury, who was then the Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University. R. P. Shaha personally ensured that the patients received both the necessary medicines and foods, recognizing the importance of nutrition in the treatment of tuberculosis.

National programs like birth control were active in the hospital from the beginning. Currently, the hospital receives an average of 12,229 patients per month. However, the number of patients suffering from peptic ulcer is the highest which is more than 500 per month on average. From the beginning till 1993, all types of medical care for patients were free of charge, but now a small registration fee is charged to the patients. Kumudini Hospital continues to offer a wide range of diagnostics and medical services. Additionally, Kumudini Hospital regularly collaborates with various national and international institutions on public health projects such as the Projanma Project, Iron Zinc Project, Diarrhea Project, Eye treatment, Fistula Project, Easy Eye Project, Family Planning Project, TB Control Project, etc. It should be mentioned here that the entire Kumudini Campus is covered in greenery and surrounded by different types of seasonal flowers and many trees of different species. R. P. Shaha believed that the green foliage of the flower garden will lift the spirits of the patients and also the greenery will help sooth their eyes, aiding to their fast recovery.

On 18 January 1954, an independent maternity ward was established at the Combined Military Hospital, Dhaka Cantonment, founded by R. P. Shaha and was inaugurated by General Mohammad Ayub Khan, then Commander-in-Chief of Pakistan army. Besides East Bengal, R. P. Shaha established the Iskander Mirza Hospital named after the then President of Pakistan in the 1950s in Peshawar, a border province of West Pakistan. President Mirza congratulated R. P. Shaha for establishing this hospital and affectionately called him the ‘Hatem Tai of Pakistan.’ R. P. Shaha also established a hospital in Hazera district named after the Pakistani President Ayub Khan’s mother. In 1969, Ayub Khan

awarded R. P. Shaha with Pakistan's highest honour, the Helal-E-Pakistan. But R. P. Shaha refused to accept this award because several Bengalis were killed by the Pakistani army during the mass movement against the rule of Ayub Khan that same year, (University, 2024).

The strength of any hospital lies in having good doctors and well-trained nurses. Therefore, it was the dream of R. P. Shaha to establish a medical college and a nursing school adjacent to Kumudini hospital at Mirzapur. However, he did not get that opportunity because he was martyred along with his son during the Liberation War in 1971. Rajiv Prasad Shaha, the grandson of R. P. Shaha and the only son of Bhabani Prasad Shaha, a social worker, businessman, and education enthusiast, fulfilled his grandfather's dream by establishing Kumudini Women's Medical College in 2001 at Mirzapur complex. The college currently has 125 seats, with a dental unit attached to the medical college in 2012, which admits 40 students every year. At present, the college hosts 691 students, of which 30% are international students. Meanwhile, the medical college has gained a wide reputation in the field of medicine in the national and international arena. Girls from several countries including Nepal, Bhutan, and India have passed MBBS and BDS from this college and are providing good medical services in their respective countries, fostering stronger social ties between Bangladesh and South-Asian countries. Kumudini Gold medals are awarded for outstanding results in examinations to encourage the students. The medical college is affiliated with Dhaka University, recognized by the Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council, and is listed by the Directorate of International Medical Education in the United States of America which enables graduates of this college to take international competitive public examinations abroad (University,2024).

Trained humanitarian nurses play a crucial role in the swift recovery of patients, making nursing an essential service in the medical field. In 1944, when the hospital was established, there were no trained nurses available in the region. Drawing on his experience as a member of the Bengal Ambulance Corps during World War 1, where he cared for wounded soldiers. R. P. Shaha took the initiative to recruit poor widows and abandoned women from rural Bengal, by personally training them to become qualified nurses. Later, he brought in experienced nurses like Mrs. Amiya Bala, a well-trained nurse from Calcutta, Miss Torience from Britain, and Mrs. Basanti Chakraborty from Cox's Bazar by appointing them as Matrons periodically to develop the hospital's nursing workforce. Additionally, in 1944, R. P. Shaha recruited several nurses from Britain to further enhance the quality of patient care at the hospital.

In 1965, R. P. Shaha took the initiative to inspire and engage the girls of Bharateswari Homes in nursing. He encouraged them, saying that girls should not confine themselves to household duties alone. Instead, they ought to learn nursing to ensure mobility within the home by caring for patients. Students ranging from classes nine to twelve were organized into groups to receive nursing training. During his visits to the hospital in Mirzapur, R. P. Shaha personally observed the students' nursing services. He emphasized on the importance of nursing with deep compassion, signifying that true blessings from God come through faithfully attending to patients, including tasks such as cleaning bedpans and administering injections with the highest care.

For a long time, R. P. Shaha felt the need to establish a nursing school in the Mirzapur Campus. His unfulfilled dream was brought to reality by his youngest daughter Mrs. Joyapati, who founded a nursing school in 1973 after taking charge of Kumudini whose first principal was Beatrice Bina Shaw. At present, more than 50 students are pursuing a three-year diploma in nursing and more than 20 students are pursuing one-and-a-year midwifery courses. The minimum qualification for admission is the Secondary School Certificate (SSC). The Trust bears the entire cost of accommodation and education of female students. But after completing their training, students must work at Kumudini hospital for two years with a salary. Currently, around 300 hundred nurses are being trained annually and the school is well known for its quality education.

Given the national and international requirements, Kumudini Nursing College was established in 2007 under the present administration of Kumudini Trust in Mirzapur Campus where a four-year B.Sc. in Nursing course, a three-year Diploma in Nursing Science and Midwifery, a three-year Diploma in Midwifery and a one-year Post-Basic B.Sc. in Nursing courses are running. The minimum qualification required for these courses is the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC). The college plays an important role in national development by creating highly skilled workforce in nursing profession. Kumudini nurses are now working in Australia, America, Canada, France, Libya and other countries. Kumudini Medical Technology Institute is a recent addition to the medical services offered on the Mirzapur campus, established in 2019. The institute offers well-regarded diploma programs in Laboratory Medicine and Physiotherapy and Ophthalmic Assistance. It also provides high-quality physiotherapy services to more than 50 patients daily at an affordable cost.

At present, two institutes are offering master's degrees in Nursing under the approval of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University in Bangladesh. One is the National Institute of Advanced Nursing Education and Research (NIANER) and the other is the Kumudini Nursing Post Graduate Institute which

was established in 2019 and started its academic activities under the programs of Nursing Management and Women Health and Midwifery Nursing in 2021 (Akhter et.al. 2023; Bogren et al. 2018). These programs follow the same curriculum, the same admission tests and question papers as Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University. The director of the institute, Chung Yule Lee and the two department heads are Dr. Linda Jones and Dr. Jenny Kerrison, lead a team of prominent professors from Bangladesh and abroad. It is hoped that a Ph.D. program in nursing is expected to be introduced by 2026, marking a new milestone for Kumidini in the field of public health (University, 2024).

3. CONCLUSION

In Bangladesh, the primary treatment methods currently include Allopathic, Homeopathic, Ayurveda, and Unani medicine. Allopathic medicine is known for effectively treating serious and life-threatening diseases, focusing on symptoms rather than underlying causes. While highly effective, allopathic treatments often come with side effects and potential toxicity. In contrast, Homeopathy seeks to strengthen the body's immune system using highly diluted medicines, which typically do not cause side effects. Ayurveda, on the other hand, targets the root causes of ailments rather than just treating the symptoms. Both Ayurveda and Unani medicines are considered natural, with minimal side effects.

As Bangladesh faces new health challenges due to climate change and environmental pollution, there has been a surge in the development of new drugs, vaccines, and an antibiotic, leading to a high success rate for allopathic treatments. However, these advancements come at a high cost and is not without side effects. Additionally, issues such as counterfeit medicines, unqualified practitioners, and expired medications remain prevalent, despite efforts by law enforcements agencies to address them. Many allopathic doctors also prescribe numerous tests and medications, which can be financially burdensome for average patients and carry additional risks.

Despite the commendable achievements of the current government in medical services, there is an urgent need for more patient-friendly policies. As a result, many people in Bangladesh are gradually turning to Homeopathy and traditional medical systems like Ayurveda and Unani, which are more affordable and have fewer side effects. In response to this growing trend and to uphold its long-standing commitment to serving humanity, the Kumudini Welfare Trust is establishing the Kumudini Ayurveda Unani Medical College and Hospital, along with Kumudini Laboratories Limited, on its Narayanganj campus. This

initiative aims to play a significant role in advancing medical services in Bangladesh.

Long live the Kumudini Welfare Trust!

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