

Worsening doctor-patient relations: Time to Act

Sir,

Physicians today are devoid of the respect they used to get during previous times rather that respect is replaced by suspicion, distrust, and anger.^[1] It often leads to some unfortunate incidents in hospital settings especially government-run centers where patients feel cheated by doctors and express anger and discontent.^[1]

I consider myself unlucky to be a spectator of such an incident during my under graduation training at one of the tertiary-care centre in New Delhi. I, along with my batch mates, was attending a class by post-graduate in doctor's duty room of Medicine Emergency, when we realized of some unfortunate incident happening in the Emergency Room. An elderly patient with history of coronary artery disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and chronic renal failure had passed away and his relatives were getting angry at the doctors and using abusive language. The security guards did nothing to calm them down. The relatives outnumbered the doctors and started to manhandle them despite the fact that doctors politely tried to explain the situation about the various co-morbidities and poor prognosis that were responsible for the death of the patient. This was the time when we, the medical students, interfered despite the advice of doctors to stay away.

The scene turns a bit ugly and a small physical altercation occurred. Since doctors and students outnumbered the relatives, the relatives ran away. Soon the police reached at the spot and calmed down the things. Official complaint was registered and the Resident Doctors Association (RDA) decided to go on strike against the administration due to the surrounding insecurity. This hampered care to other patients admitted in the hospital. Though by the end of day, issues were settled with assurance given by the administration to tighten the security and take strict measures to prevent similar incidents in the future, it exposed the students to the harsh realities and practical problems prevalent in the field of medicine. Many students felt discouraged and were shocked to witness such a situation in a profession they considered so divine and noble. No one knew who was to be blamed for it.

Incidents like this are not uncommon in hospitals and are a proof of growing dissent among patients towards doctors. These incidents put a long lasting negative impact on young tender minds of the students. Study done by Ghosh

et al., showed that there is growing concern among parents of resident doctors regarding safety of their children in hospitals and it may discourage future generation from getting into medical profession.^[2] This is a serious issue especially when we already have a poor doctor-patient ratio in India. The increasing irresponsibility of media acts as a catalyst to add fuel to the problem. We believe that lack of medical ethics as a separate subject in the undergraduate medical education is the core lacunae responsible for these problems. Considering the depth of problem, this issue needs to be seriously tackled by the Medical Council of India (MCI) soon and the possibility of introduction of medical ethics as a separate topic in curriculum should be seriously considered. Various steps like more stress on communication skills, psychological analysis skills and clinical skills during medical curriculum and introduction of patient welfare society have been suggested to reduce such incidents.^[2]

We believe that a little more caution by the doctors in handling relatives, flawless duty by security personnel, efforts by the hospital managements and strict actions against culprits taking law in hand can help reduce such incidents and help restore the lost prestige of doctors in the Indian society and help prevent similar recurrences.

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