



Commentary on 'Save the doctor and the nurse'

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This COVID 19 pandemic will leave a lasting impression on young doctors just starting out in their careers, as well as on medical students who are watching close on the sidelines of this game-changing health crisis. It is an existential quandary, posed beautifully in the poetic piece 'Save the doctor and the nurse' published in this journal.

*"They toil to build other's homes,
Yet face the angry neighbour."*

There is an outpouring of stories of doctors and nurses who have to work without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), health workers harrassed at their residences and driven out of colonies while on duty, doctors acquiring the illness and even losing their lives to it. While violence against doctors and personal health risk were part of the healthcare landscape even before COVID-19, the pandemic has now amplified these

issues and has shone the spotlight on the glaring brokenness of our health system. Ringing bells, clanging plates, lighted candles and showered petals appear somehow grotesquely inappropriate to health workers faced with the task to soldier on despite insufficient protection, social scorn, and heightened risk.

*"Over time, the building grows taller
With sparkling window panes,
But under the lustre of the walls,
We fail to see the stains"*

The poem reflects on reasons for this brokenness and carries a thread of sadness linked to the sense of being wronged as a fraternity; there is a fatalistic certainty that nothing may change. Urban hospitals are thriving only because the public sector in health is weak and the capitalist model cannot serve the majority of patients who cannot

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afford their services. The poet claims that urban doctors are targeted as the face of these inaccessible institutions, because the deprived either do not know who is truly responsible, or cannot reach them even if they wish to hold them accountable. The poet laments that doctors are also objectivised within these urban hospitals, used as a means to an end, who can be silenced or replaced.

*"Stains of blood and sweat,
Stains of sacrifice and tears,
"shhhh.. you are in a noble profession
So just Smile and Say cheers!"*

There is a stripping away of the dignity of the profession when doctors are perceived merely as 'paid workers' and 'service providers'. For many aspiring young medicos, this is not the reason they chose this way of life and there is the struggle within, as they try to come to terms with the loss of 'nobility' and respect for the profession; why did it happen, and what does it mean to be a doctor today? Abandoned by all, and left hanging on to personal convictions alone, sheer survival in this profession becomes paramount as all meaning is denuded. Working in rural areas is almost a non-starter, as doctors are denied infrastructure and career incentives that are essential for such a choice.

*"Maybe you should be like other
Stressed out pals and peers,
Hop into a bar that offers
Some sparkling shots and beers!"*

How will this impact medical students who are caught up in the swirl of angst and terror, as doctors turn into 'warriors' and sacrificial victims in this existential struggle? Will it take the sheen off this profession and bring fewer young aspirants to serve as doctors in this country, further straining our healthcare resources? Will this broken impasse push more young doctors to take flight to inviting shores in other lands? One way or the other we are going to pay heavily as a society for neglecting quality and access to health care in this country.

This reflective poem could serve as a tool during the Attitude, Ethics and Communication (AETCOM) modules to initiate discussions with first year medical students, and also with other health professions learners, on what it means to be a doctor/provider, and how to balance their rights and their responsibilities. Further, it could be a good resource to inspire learners to become advocates so that they can change the narrative to one that is more empowering and encouraging.