



We could have saved him

Manish Kumar, MD

Associate Professor, Pediatrics, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Gorakhpur

Corresponding Author:

Manish Kumar
Department of Pediatrics
All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Gorakhpur
Uttar Pradesh, India
Email: singh dot manish dot 15 at gmail dot com

Received: 10-SEP-2020

Accepted: 03-OCT-2020

Published: 02-NOV-2020

Abstract: Violence against doctors is a global phenomenon but, in India, the situation is grim. News of violence against medical professionals is published with an alarming regularity, to the point where it has become “part of the package” of being a healthcare worker. Most of these untoward incidents are in the emotionally charged environs of the emergency room where provision of healthcare is abysmally unstructured. Many recent incidents have snowballed into controversies attracting national and international headlines. Disillusionment in the young professionals is palpable, yet, when the media spotlight moves elsewhere, not many amongst us reflect on how these incidents have changed the lives of those impacted. This story is a fictionalized account of incidents in a medical college after a stampede during a festival. The story will resonate across different settings where medical professionals have faced the brunt of failures of our healthcare system. Most of us have survived with physical and psychological scars, while a few others have quit the system altogether.

Key words: Physician burnout; Violence; Workplace violence

Shahrukh was not known to disappoint anyone. “Don’t worry, I’ll manage” he’d said, resorting to his favorite phrase while rolling his brown eyes playfully in a poor attempt to impersonate his more illustrious namesake. He had just acceded to my plea to serve as my replacement in the pediatric emergency on a festival night.

Glad to be his latest beneficiary, I rushed through the empty city streets to be with family. These same streets would soon overflow with thousands making their way to the banks of the river Ganges to offer prayers. When I reached home, I was a little disappointed to learn that my family had chosen to pray at home and not on the banks of the river as was our custom. The initial disappointment, however, was soon forgotten in the happiness of being with the

people who mattered the most to me.

As the happy hours passed, I almost forgot about the person whose benevolence had made this evening possible for me, until I looked at my mobile phone’s screen which read “Shahrukh, 5 missed calls”. *Something is not right*, I frowned, and dialed back, only to find that Shahrukh’s phone was switched off.

The unease in my gut grew - I was about to redial when my dad yelled “You have to see this”. It was the local news channel reporting that there had been a stampede on the banks of the Ganges right beside our infirmary. The preliminary reports were unsure about the scale of the casualties but the worst was expected. A chill went down my spine as my gaze went from the

Cite this article as: Kumar M. We could have saved him. RHIME. 2020;7:220-2.

television screen to my mobile screen.

They needed help, Shahrukh needed help!

“I have to go back to the hospital” I yelled. Even before I could reach for my bike’s key, the news channels started flashing visuals of an irate mob rioting outside our hospital. Apparently, the meager facilities at our hospital had been overwhelmed. Everything was in a shambles. The triage room at the emergency was full of bodies; not all of them dead if rumors were to be believed. The under-preparedness of our emergency services and administrative inertia had stretched the bereaved families’ patience to breaking point and mayhem had ensued. The resident doctors, being at the forefront, were at the receiving end of the mob’s ire and so, perhaps, was Shahrukh.

He was not supposed to have been there, I was!

As I neared the hospital, the signs of arson were obvious and I was in the grip of my worst fears. The police force was beginning to gather a semblance of control but the visuals of burnt leather, broken glass, and splattered blood in a background of shrieks, sobs and wails narrated the madness of the past few hours.

When I reached the pediatric emergency, many of my colleagues and seniors were already there, trying their level best to bring some sanity to the situation. Triage routines were being reestablished, albeit shakily, but where was Shahrukh? My colleagues were clueless as well.

My search for Shahrukh became frantic now - the guilt was weighing me down. We finally found him, hidden in a stairwell, disheveled and shaking. He had a hospital attendant for company who had apparently pulled him out of the raging mob to the ignominious safety of their hiding place.

“It was a nightmare, sir” the hospital attendant told us minutes later. “The mob, armed with the rumor that some of the children who had been pronounced dead on arrival were actually alive, wanted the

doctors to reexamine them.”

“Shahrukh sir was attending to a gasping child,” the attendant continued, “when the mob caught him and dragged him to the triage room. He resisted, saying let me try and save those who can be saved. But he was manhandled and beaten, sir. They also said bad words pointing towards his beard, sir.”

The anger and shame I felt was nauseating. Shahrukh was now lying on the examination trolley with clenched fists and blank eyes, perhaps reliving the horrors of the past few hours. We took Shahrukh to his hostel room, and we sat there, six of his colleagues, in stony silence through the night - the silence pierced only by Shahrukh’s delirious mutterings “We could have saved him” referring perhaps to the gasping child he had been examining before he was manhandled.

Shahrukh never talked about the ordeal again. Two days later he asked for a sabbatical, which was duly granted. He never returned; nor were our phone calls, texts, emails and social platform pings ever returned. The list of casualties in that stampede never mentioned the death of a doctor - not physically but professionally.

Six years have passed since I last saw Shahrukh. The bruises inflicted on him that night have now become scars on my psyche. I sometimes lie sleepless at night for hours wondering whether my medical career would have met the same inglorious end had Shahrukh not replaced me that day in the emergency. I have learned to live with it and also with the almost-daily reports of violence against doctors in my land. However, I do flinch and my gut revolts for I am teleported to that gory night.

I don’t know how many Shahrukhs have been victim to these incidents. Who killed Shahrukh the doctor? What is it that makes many of us either leave the profession or leave this country? The junior doctors in my country are a much maligned lot - branded as callous, incompetent, and, at times, as outright criminals. The reason is that they are the first point of contact in a healthcare

system where delivery of emergency services is abysmally unregulated and pathetically disorganized. A stark shortage of manpower and resources; underutilization of available resources due to a lack of protocols, standards and quality assurances; lack of formal training in emergency medicine; lack of legislations and their implementation due to state apathy and administrative failures: these are all nails in the coffin of the medical careers of Shahrukh and many others like him.

I will take two things that Shahrukh said to my grave. I hope he is reading this. I hope, Sharukh, that you did what you always declared: "Don't worry, I'll manage". With apologies from a system that has failed you, I wish you all the best. For the sake of many "Shahrukhs" and for the sake of the healthcare system in this country, I hope we change for the better in terms of our emergency healthcare delivery, because that's the only way, "we could have saved him" - that child and Shahrukh, both.
