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Doctor as ministering angel, not God

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Attacks on defenceless doctors are born from grief and anger but such attacks are unfair.

Recent attacks on doctors in 2017:

- March 12: A 35-year-old resident doctor Rohan Mhamunkar was brutally assaulted by a mob of relatives of a patient at the Dhule Civil Hospital.
- March 16: Three hospital employees – a trainee doctor, a medical officer and a staff nurse – were allegedly assaulted by relatives of a patient who died of H1N1 at the Nashik Civil Hospital.
- March 18: Dr Rohit Tated, a polio-afflicted resident doctor from Sion Hospital was assaulted by relatives of a 60-year-old patient with chronic kidney disease.
- March 18: A group of about ten people attempted to attack Dr Sarang Dave at the Parel's Wadia Hospital due to the unavailability of a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) bed. The hospital, however, denied the incident.
- March 19: An orthopaedic junior resident at the Government Medical College in Aurangabad was beaten up by a patient's relatives. (Scroll.in)

Violent attacks on doctors and medical staff, by grieving relatives often become headline news. Pictures of a defenceless doctor being attacked by an enraged mob, a white-coated physician unable to defend himself or herself against the collective fury of families is a photo we often see. Who is to blame? Are doctors guilty of medical negligence failing to diagnose or failing to be adequately sensitive to patient's needs? Or are families sometimes in denial, unable to come to terms with a death and do they simply lash out at doctors from their own grief-

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stricken anger and restless despondency at the loss of a precious loved one?

In my many interviews and programs on this issue, I have found that every doctor I interviewed without exception is invariably guided by the first line of the Hippocratic oath, *Primum Non Nocere*, "First, To Do No Harm". A doctor cannot, is not trained to, is not inclined to and is not, either by instinct or by emotion ever motivated to harm his patient. It's worthwhile to note the conditions in which many doctors work. According to WHO statistics, the current doctor-patient population ratio in India is approximately 1: 2000, when according to WHO guidelines it should be 1: 1000. There is thus a 50 percent shortage of doctors. Of the 8, 56,065 allopathic doctors in India, 600,000 are active practitioners. Indian doctors are enormously skilled because they have a massive range of clinical experience yet they work in conditions in which their skills are often simply not supported by adequate medical infrastructure. In September 2017, Dr Kafeel Khan was arrested and jailed because of the deaths of 30-40 infants in a Gorakhpur hospital in August 2017. However, in the light of new evidence it has emerged that Dr Khan in fact launched a heroic personal effort to bring oxygen supplies to the hospital and in fact saved many lives through sheer individual action and energy. Dr Khan's story is a heart-rending one and reveals how unfairly a doctor can be blamed and persecuted even when he strains his every nerve in an emergency situation to save as many lives as he can, and how he remains unsupported not only by emergency infrastructure, but also is at the mercy of politicians and public wrath.

Many doctors have told me in interviews how exhaustingly long work hours, lack of adequate

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investment in healthcare infrastructure, lack of proper emergency and medical infrastructure, the return of killer diseases and epidemics which are sometimes completely unexpected, can take a heavy toll on how a doctor is able to diagnose and treat his patients. The recent death of nurse Lini in a Kozhikode district hospital due to the outbreak of the Nipah virus shows how medical staff too face dangerous health risks.

“Sometimes a patient’s life does end, death is a reality, a doctor cannot defeat death however hard he tries,” an eminent surgeon once told me, “how can a doctor be blamed for every death?” Sometimes medical emergencies do take place and there are differences between negligence and complication in the disease: in these situations grieving relatives often need someone to blame, and the defenseless solitary doctor working alone in wards with little support, becomes a soft target.

In 2002, the Delhi High Court ordered a ban on strikes by AIIMS doctors and strikes and protests by doctors against attacks have been frowned upon by courts. The public sentiment has been that as leaders of society, as figures who are looked up to, a doctor should not be seen to be engaging in trade union activity. But many doctors have helplessly admitted that sometimes the strike is their last resort as the administration simply does not listen to their grievances. Sometimes in the break-neck speed at which a doctor has to work, medical errors do take place, there is overcrowding of patients, lack of nurses and technicians, lack of hospital security systems, the doctor finds herself or himself in the firing line. In an important judgement in 2009, Justices Katju and R M Lodha held: “While this court has no sympathy for doctors who are negligent, it must also be said that frivolous complaints against doctors have grown by leaps and bounds in our country particularly after the medical profession was placed under the purview of the Consumer Protection Act.”

Yet it is interesting that the family of a judge, late Justice J S Verma’s family in 2013 accused the reputed Medanta Hospital of negligence. The most

famous case of medical negligence was the Anuradha Saha medical negligence case of 1998 when the Kolkata High Court ordered 17 Kolkata doctors to stand trial for criminal conspiracy. In 2011, the apex court ordered the highest ever compensation of 1.7 crore for medical negligence to Anuradha Saha’s husband Dr Kunal Saha.

Several questions can be raised when it comes to medical negligence: Should there be much greater transparency in the doctor-patient relationship to avoid allegations of medical negligence? Is it important to fix accountability in a hospital set up? Are doctors being wrongly targeted? Is there a need to regulate mushrooming clinics and unregistered practitioners? Does medical negligence have to be proved not subjectively asserted? Is the commercialization of massive private hospitals leading to loss of care? Do hospital administrations need to provide proper security to doctors?

Medical negligence and laws governing it is of course a vast subject (the Supreme Court had gone into the details of what constitutes medical negligence in the 2005 Dr Jacob Mathew case) and needs introspection on both sides, on the part of bereaved families as well as on the part of the healthcare sector. But leaving aside the complicated ethical and legal issue of negligence, violent behavior towards doctors must end.

As a rule of thumb there must be zero tolerance on violence against doctors. Too many doctors have complained to me and many other journalists of being manhandled by relatives, about foul language from families and volatility, resentment and aggression against doctors. This kind of behaviour towards a medical practitioner or towards any citizen is unacceptable.

Doctors in India are remarkable human beings, risking their own health often to look after their patients. They face excessive bureaucratic controls, sometimes political demands or have to bear the pressures of rampant commercialism. Often there are just too many patients for a doctor to deal with on his own. Doctors complain that there is too much government interference in government hospitals

and experts and specialists are not allowed to run premier institutes. Most important of all, a doctor cannot gain mastery over the laws of nature. All of us as citizens need to accept that death is sometimes a natural result of the body's inability to fight, and no doctor however skillful can win the war against

death-the most immutable omnipresent undeniable reality of human life. So let's not direct our fury and grief against the hard-working healer as he toils in an overcrowded ward, instead let's heed the words of an eminent surgeon who told me, "Citizens need to understand that while the doctor is a ministering angel, he is not God."