

Reflections from ER

The era of asphyxiation

Ujala Kausar

Author's Affiliation

Department of Emergency
Medicine, Shifa International
Hospital, Islamabad

Correspondence to:

ujalafawad310@gmail.com

He cannot escape death. Despite maximum ventilator settings and liters upon liters of oxygen, he is gasping for life. The continuous alarm of the ventilator deeply concerns the nursing staff. All possible efforts by the healthcare team were futile. Discussions regarding new guidelines, better treatment regimens, or ongoing research trials were eventually of no help. This is the course of his illness that he has to endure until the angel of death steers him away into the heavens, where he may finally get enough oxygen to breathe again.

"Amma Ji! You must stay inside. You need oxygen, and you can't just roam around without it". She was an elderly frail patient craving for air. Her parched, dried lips uttered her desire to breathe. *"Baita! Let me go outside. I need to breathe fresh air".* She was panting by the time she completed her sentence. She, like countless others, was fighting the agonizing battle against the virus. The ER doctor wondered how long it would take to calm her down, to make her realize that the oxygen in the air is not enough for her and that this might ultimately consume her, easing her pain and agony at last.

"Sir, this is the Emergency Red zone area; only the patient is allowed to come inside. You have to stay outside while we assess and treat your father." His son's forehead began to wrinkle, and sweat dripped down his face. With a mixed expression of helplessness and anger, he shouts, *"He is my father, do you understand that? I am not going to send him alone inside. What if I don't get him back alive, and you bring out his dead body?"* And there begins a conversation tainted with the unfortunate mistrust of healthcare workers, fueled by the anecdotal evidence found all over social media. But of course, no one wants to leave their loved ones alone in distress. After a long, elaborate discussion, the son lets his father be steered in alone, for he has no other choice.

"The disease has destroyed his lungs, and

he has no capacity in him to breathe now. No machine can help him come out of this. Placing him on a ventilator will only prolong his agony with no favorable outcome." A counseling session begins with the family, explaining that no extraordinary resuscitation measures can bring him back whole.

"Sir, there are no vacant beds available in our hospital. Please take your patient to another healthcare facility." A look of the utmost distress appears on his face. *"We have been wandering around for the past 10 hours, from hospital to hospital, unable to find a bed for my mother anywhere! Are you going to refuse us too? My father died yesterday with the same disease, and I don't want to lose my mother this way too!"* He sighs and begins to cry. The doctor places a hand on his shoulder, *"I'm so sorry you've had to go through all this. We will admit her to the emergency department for now, but we cannot admit her. We have to refer her to another hospital after initial resuscitation".* He has no other option, so he agrees with reluctance.

These are some of the excerpts we have heard echoed in the halls of our emergency department. We have been going through all this for over a year now. We have seen people suffocate to death, hopeless and helpless, every single day. We still spend a substantial amount of time each day arguing with people that it is a disease, and they need to protect themselves from it. Some of them are losing their dear ones to the virus yet still don't believe that COVID-19 is real. And then, when I hear people complain that they feel suffocated when forced to wear a surgical mask for their protection, I am speechless.

The outbreak was something unexpected. But suddenly, it has changed our lives completely. We have shown remarkable resilience to accommodate ourselves in the new world. Staying away from loved ones for so long was never easy. Keeping children away from school was never

acceptable in the pre-COVID era. We have never seen hospitals choked with patients and people dying on the streets because of the shortage of beds before. This phase of evolution is still ongoing. Man is learning new ways of living. What more do we have to bear ahead? Will this ever end? These are some questions in everyone's mind, which no one can answer yet. But one thing, it has brought us closer to nature. Isolating oneself is sometimes necessary for nurturing. Excelled in the luxurious lifestyle, we forgot what was essential to live and what we needed to work on. We see the whole world unite after a long time to combat the disease.

The pandemic has taught us so many lessons. For instance, as healthcare workers, we need more skill and knowledge in our profession. We need to strengthen ourselves for future pandemics. Hospitals need to be

more equipped and should be re-designed in a whole new way to cater to the needs of this pandemic. A strong bond of trust has to be formed between the public and healthcare workers, with the media working as a bridge.

But above all, it has changed our perspective. The things that seemed to be ordinary have become extraordinary. They have taught us their value. That little oxygen in the air which we never spared a thought to before has now become the sole need of the entire world. The message is clear, and it took so many lives to make us realize this. We should be grateful for the things in our life. We have learned the hard way that if you can breathe in normal air in this era of asphyxiation, you are among the luckiest people on the planet.