



When BEST Intentions Go Awry: Arsenic Mitigation in Bangladesh Epilogue

BEST administrators invited a wide range of government officials to the May 8, 2008 press conference in Laksam. They included the Comilla district commissioner, the Upazila (sub-district) administrative officer, and the Laksam health and family planning officer. The BEST managers also invited representatives from the Department of Public Health Engineering. Family planning and public health engineering held local authority over health and arsenic-related activities and could vouch for the researchers.

The press conference drew between 60 and 70 attendees. Superfund-Bangladesh Project Director Tariq Islam and BEST Director Mahfuz Rahman answered questions, while Dr. Samar Kumar from ICDDR,B looked on. Islam emphasized to the assembled media that their criticism of BEST stood to harm participants. He recalls:

I said that if the trial is stopped, who would suffer? The poor people of Laksam who are suffering from arsenicosis—nothing more than this. We don't lose anything. I will not lose my job and you will not lose your journalism [job]. Only the poor fellow who doesn't have a voice will suffer.¹

Countering charges that the researchers were unavailable to the community, Islam stressed that they'd met with trial participants individually when enrolling them and provided them with contact information. At the conference, the researchers circulated phone numbers for the trial's directors and the Bangladesh Medical Research Council (BMRC), which had OK'd the study and was monitoring it. Islam remembers telling the attendees:

¹ Lundberg interview with Tariqul Islam on February 4, 2012, in Araihaazar, Narayongonj, Bangladesh. All further quotes from Islam, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

We did not come here to play hide and seek. And we did not force anybody [to participate]. If we did, nobody would accept our research and [results].

BEST officials also addressed business interests. They reiterated that the research trial posed minimal threat to local purveyors of water filters because Laksam was a town of half a million, while the researchers were distributing fewer than 1,200 free filters. They also noted that the project was a significant local employer, having hired more than 200 field workers. Then questions turned to the study's double-blind, placebo control design. Says Laksam Project Director Ahmed Talat Haider:

When our senior officials described the science, the layman journalists could not understand what randomization is or what a placebo is. Then Dr. Samar Kumar from ICDDR,B came through, and took charge and he took the microphone and explained the research in the local language.²

While Kumar got the message across, it wasn't clear how it would be received in the community. It did not bode well that, because his explanation put BEST in a good light, local journalists assumed he'd been paid to slant the facts. Fortunately, BEST could also draw on contacts at the district and national levels to plead their case. The Comilla district commissioner, senior police officials, and the advisor to the HEALS study—a physician who had been a senior consultant to the Bangladeshi government—all interceded on their behalf.

While BEST researchers were forced to scramble for several intense weeks, by June the crisis had passed and the trial continued uninterrupted. Damage control in fact provided an opportunity to improve ties with the community for the remainder of the 10-year study. Epidemiologist and principal investigator of both HEALS and BEST Habibul Ahsan recalls:

We sent our staff to each of the participants and made them aware of our stance and what's the motivation for these news articles. We basically tried to educate our study participants in this context. We tackled it in a way that strengthened our relations with the community, with the participants, whose actual health is at stake.

² Kirsten Lundberg interview with Ahmed Talat Haider February 4, 2012, in Araihaaz, Narayongonj, Bangladesh. All further quotes from Haider, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview