Put your own oxygen mask before helping others

The latest amendment in Hippocratic Oath was made on 14th October 2017 at Chicago in general assembly of world medical association(1). Out of few notable changes made; there is a striking entry of a clause for doctor’s own health. It reads, “I WILL ATTEND TO my own health, well being, and abilities in order to provide care of the highest standard”. Although this clause is preceded by the clause; “THE HEALTH AND WELL BEING OF MY PATIENT will be my first consideration”, by adding a clause for the health and well being of doctor, the amendment has given a bit of freedom to the doctor.

The next question comes in the mind; what brings the change of adding doctor’s health and well being into the picture. Is it the observation that doctors themselves neglect(2) their health due to various reasons or is it a need of an hour looking at current social and political situation; or both? Is it a subconscious response of the medical fraternity; for treating a doctor as a service provider and a patient as a consumer?

The doctors are being targeted across the world, apparently more so in India(3). Thrashing and abusing a doctor has become quite frequent in India. The recent policies of the government has reduced the attractiveness of this profession, although the Covid 19 pandemic has soften their stand a bit, hope so not temporarily. Media has never missed an opportunity to put the profession in a bad frame. Apparently it appears that the time has changed and everyone is aiming at his/her own goals and agendas rather looking at the greater good. It would be biased if I say that only society, government and media are responsible for the current situation. I must acknowledge that bad bugs in medical fraternity also have played role bringing bad name to this profession.

The Covid 19 pandemic gives a unique opportunity to discuss the clauses in perspectives, especially for smaller hospitals and nursing homes which gives treatment to non – Covid patients. These smaller hospitals are the cornerstone of healthcare in India. Keeping these hospitals close would be a disservice to our patients, and keeping them open carries a definitive risk. An asymptomatic carrier can give infection to anybody in the hospital and if any patient or healthcare worker comes positive, everyone has to be quarantined and the hospital will be sealed off. There is a risk of doctor being blamed by public and media, losing the reputation in seconds. If you are a surgeon, in India yet it is not approved to have Covid 19 test for all preoperative patients those who do not have respiratory symptoms. Surgery carries a significant risk of spread of Covid infection, even in latent period or asymptomatic carriers. Universal precautions in form of PPE (personal protective equipment) are being advised. There is a definitive scarcity of PPE, ideal PPE is even bigger problem. Majority hospitals use PPE in operation theatre but not in wards; its viability is also doubtful. Is it alright to use universal precautions only in operation theatre; where disease is spread by respiratory route? Many cases which can be easily managed by laparoscopic approach with its benefits, there is no enough data to comment about risk involved in laparoscopic surgery during Covid 19 pandemic; where there is a perceived higher risk of aerosol formation and infection transmission(4, 5). Offering open surgery to these patients keeping in mind the risk involved is a fair decision or not is another question to be answered.

At present we have more questions than answers. The bigger question is how to balance between patient and doctor’s health and well being as per revised Hippocratic Oath. If more and more doctors go into quarantine, ultimately it’s a bigger loss to the society. What comes in my mind, the frequently spoken line by crew while safety demonstration in flight; “put your own oxygen mask before helping others”.

References

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