

VIEWPOINT

What about human rights?

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As I watch the love and attention poured on animals on the Discovery channel, I experience a feeling of helplessness because I realise that human lives are often considered of lesser value than the lives of animals in developed countries.

One can notice the differences between a government and private hospital while working in a government hospital set-up. A hospital is a place that most people would visit only if they had no alternative. On an average day this is how the wards in a government hospital appear—helpless human beings at the mercy of professionals who themselves appear pretty helpless. One nurse is expected to care for nearly 50–70 patients while one doctor handles about 80–100 patients. One anaesthetist assists at 10–15 surgeries. A striking violation is the 'shunting' of staff between the contaminated diarrhoea ward and the neonatal intensive care unit (ICU).

A government hospital has 'human leeches' all over, beginning with the security guard who demands money to permit the entry of relatives into the hospital. The wards have patients 'strewn' on cots and the floor. A heartbreaking sight is that of a young woman with 70%–75% burns lying exposed on rusted cots, without even a screen. Urinary bags are tied to the cots with discarded intravenous tubings.

Equally horrifying is the sight of patients being injected with used needles and syringes, after merely flushing them with tap water. Even intravenous tubings are flushed with tap water and reused. Wound dressings are done by ward boys who threaten patients and earn as much as Rs 30–40 per dressing. Suture removal is done by *ayahs*. Burns dressing, which should be done under highly sterile conditions, is performed by untrained women who even beat the patients if they complain of pain.

Around December 1, politicians and professionals make a hue and cry about universal precautions, but there are hospitals where water is not available even for simple hand-washing. Gloves, masks and aprons are a far-fetched dream. Sometimes, a power failure can jeopardise the

entire functioning of the hospital. Bodies in the mortuary rot due of this.

Another awful place is the labour room, which has no privacy and compassion. The application of fundal pressure, a practice buried long ago in other countries, is still prevalent here. After all the pain and travail, the mother has to shell out Rs 200–300, just to know the sex of her newborn.

There is a constant dearth of all the five M's of management—man, money, material, minutes and methods. Amputations are performed without any preparation for postoperative management; patients even go home with a colostomy bag not knowing how to manage it. I do not agree that all this lethargy is due to lack of funds. After all, each private college pools in nearly Rs 1,00,000 annually for the clinical experience of their students, and with six to seven colleges availing this facility, I fail to understand where this revenue is being siphoned off.

For the elite and many of the upper middle class, there are private hospitals and hospitals abroad, but what about the common man? Do we value their numbers only for their votes or does the nation have a responsibility towards them?

Who is to be blamed? I conclude that the whole system is wrong. There is no accountability on the part of anybody working here. The nurses blame the doctors, the doctors blame the administration and the administration blames the class IV union. Among all this, the mute patient is the one who suffers. The entire healthcare personnel must pull up their socks and get down to a result-oriented programme. This is possible only if the general public is aware of their rights.

I plead with all my well-meaning friends to visit these hospitals and experience the truth. The despair of our underprivileged fellowmen, our fellow Indians, will cause restlessness within. Will anybody help? The health minister? The chief minister? The public? Will you fight for the rights of our fellow humans at least, please?