

## Police vs doctors: Harassment of Covid “heroes”, by Covid “heroes”?

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Violence against medical professionals and destruction of hospital property by frustrated patients and their relatives occur frequently in India (1) and in other countries (2, 3). However, harassment of healthcare workers by the police has, so far, not been an issue in the Indian healthcare system. Now, cases of harassment of medical professionals by the police have emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic. Ironically, both doctors and police personnel have been considered “frontline heroes” against the pandemic in India. We present some cases of such attacks.

In Telangana, in March 2020, police stopped a doctor and her colleague on their way to hospital duty in the night shift. They were slapped, abused, and taken to the police station, and had their phones snatched (4). On March 29, 2020, an oncologist in Kolkata was summoned to the police station. There he was asked to write an apology for “misleading” people through his social media post, where he had expressed concern over the lack of protective gear for doctors serving in Covid-19 wards in his state. His phone was taken away and he was questioned for more than 16 hours (5). In May 2020, two similar episodes were reported, back to back, from Jammu and Kashmir. On March 25, 2020, a senior interventional cardiologist from a tertiary care centre, was intercepted, on his way to attend emergency duty, by a police constable and taken to an adjacent police station where he was thrashed and his phone confiscated. He was not even permitted to talk to his family and his colleagues, though he was the on-call consultant cardiologist for cardiac emergency, for his own and other associated hospitals (6). The very next day on March 26, 2020, the Chief Medical Officer of district Bandipora, was on his way to a Covid-19 sampling site in his official vehicle. He was stopped and prevented from going ahead by the police constables at a checkpoint, despite his polite request to leave. It was only after he came out of his vehicle, shouted at the police, accused them of harassment of doctors and called the higher officials in the administration and police, that he was allowed to go (7).

As a newspaper headline says, “Police brutality towards

healthcare workers is not a cure for coronavirus” (4). There is an urgent need to address the challenges thrown up by the pandemic and healthcare staff need to be supported, not obstructed and brutalised, in carrying out their duties. The medical fraternity and associations need to protest against these atrocities legally. The higher authorities of the police department and of the health department need to co-ordinate and conduct sensitisation programmes that may bring wiser counsel and harmony. Last but not the least, the police department should be made accountable for its actions. It is high time for the state governments and the Government of India to take these crimes by the police against healthcare workers into consideration and implement their own ordinance against violent acts towards medical professionals (8).

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