

Opinion article

**Losing Terra Firma: The case for volunteerism
in Surgeons.**

ABSTRACT

Surgery. The field of medicine, that has played a pivotal role in the evolution of healthcare delivery for generations, even centuries. We have moved far from the time when a breast surgery was a grotesque scene to a state where dozens of operations are performed at the Outpatient facilities. This change has brought with it certain limitations to the growth of the psyche of a surgeon. The tsunami of machines and technologies, which brought comfort and ease to the struggling patients, has also brought mindlessness and arrogance to the practitioners of this beautiful art. As we rely more on the machines, our approach becomes more mechanistic, and we lose grip on the ambition we had as we entered our career: to help humanity. One of the most gratifying aspects of surgery is that we can actually heal a patient in real time; heal their wounds, both physical and metaphorical, with our own hands. There is a solution to this disarray: separate the money from the art, not always, but occasionally. Surgeons have always been the beacons of volunteer activities; there is a reason Doctors Without Borders (MSF) constitutes more of surgeons than any other fields. With volunteerism, surgeons understand the world outside the hospital ward and gain insights into patients' mentality and their fears at a more visceral level. The empathy we gain from such activities will eventually help us become better guardians of health when he re-enters those hospital wards.

Keywords: *Volunteerism, Surgery, Developing countries.*

The mucosa in my nose was burning; the ground beneath my feet was still shaky. Being a doctor-in-training, I had spent countless hours in morgues around dead and putrefying bodies and almost two years in anatomy labs to develop a certain tolerance for the stench humans exude after the blood in their bodies' stops circulating. A stench so visceral and repugnant is hard to forget. But my nose couldn't tolerate the stench that hung over Savar, a sub-district on the outskirts of Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. Maybe it was because I had never been in an area where more than a thousand people were suddenly crushed alive under the concrete blocks of an unstable building. Savar is famous in Bangladesh for its cenotaph, where people often commemorate the struggle for their independence in 1971. Today, however, it was on its way to become famous all over the world for the struggle that poor garment factory workers go through for their financial dependence. A glum irony.

Just ten days before, on 14th April, Bangladeshis celebrated their most joyous and colorful festival of Pohela Boisaikh. It was a myriad of yellows, whites, and reds. Today, there was red. Bloody red. Too much of it, actually. A few hours back, before being jolted out of my routine work, I was attending patients in my ward. My phone rang, the caller's voice was full of grief and urgency; it was a close friend informing me about the building collapse and advised me to stay on the qui vive for more-than-usual trauma patients. Immediately, I ran to the doctor's room, a dingy cubicle meant for the prohibited slumber for on-call doctors. I switched on the small television, wiped the blanket of dust from the screen and turned the broken volume button up. I stood flabbergasted as I witnessed the deadliest accidental structural failure in modern human history. It was live, and astonishingly grotesque. I was to be a spectator of one of humanity's biggest failures.

As I stayed back to attend the trauma patients, a thought crossed my mind: there was a large team of doctors in the hospital but how many doctors were available to the injured at the site of collapse? Luckily, I had some friends at the local chapter of International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC). Fully aware that ICRC and BDRCS would mobilize their disaster management teams immediately to the site, I called one of my acquaintances and offered to volunteer at the medical camp at Savar. Riots had broken out; mobs of garment factory workers were vandalizing public and private property as a show of protest and solidarity with their brethren as the news of the building collapse spread like wildfire, which housed dozens of small garment factories employing several thousand employees.

Anxiously, and not knowing what to expect, I rode in an uncomfortable auto-rickshaw towards Savar. The driver was reluctant to go into that area so I had to lure him by offering more-than-usual "badha", the local term for fare. Armed with iron rods and bamboo sticks, a large mob had cordoned off the site and wouldn't let me pass till I "proved" I had genuine intentions of helping the injured. My exotic Bengali accent and a card from ICRC helped me get through. The closer I walked to the site, the stronger the stench, the stronger the burning in my nose, the shakier the ground beneath. This time my eyes gave up as well and started pouring copious amounts of tears, eventually requiring a pair of nude goggles and a sturdy facemask to withstand the stench of death. I felt as if I had been deported to a distant land of misery.

As a child, I spent a considerable time in the most violent and volatile regions of the world. As such, I was a helpless observer to the carnage unleashed on the streets and was no stranger to a scene of scattered dead bodies. And even then, while I explored the rubble that was once an eight-story building, I was horrified. The wreckage resembled on a very large scale a loosely arranged stack of cards, which were elaborately decorated like a tapestry; only this time the cards were made of reinforced concrete and the motifs were provided by gnarled and mutilated dead bodies of poor garment workers. When the ceilings from each floor had caved in, the workers were caught off guard and most of them couldn't fathom a route for escape. I imagine the only thought that crossed their mind was to embrace their fate, and each other. TIME magazine had published one such photograph, a husband had held on to his wife right before the concrete immortalized their union. I saw death in its most raw and unforgiving form.

I was part of the team assigned to ascertain which of them were still part of this world and to seal the ones who had moved on to the next one in special plastic bags coated with preservatives on the inside and to provide prompt initial treatment to the ones hanging in the middle. It was the most difficult triage of my life, with such harrowing cases of trauma not even in the surgical textbooks. The lucky ones were missing their limbs only; it was comparatively easy to save them once we stitched the bleeding vessels in their limbs before



77 labeling them amputees. The unlucky ones were languishing in pain; with their bodies
 78 besmeared with a cocktail of blood, dust and concrete, most of them were still stuck under
 79 the heavy blocks. To retrieve these people was a colossal challenge. The scene represented
 80 a ghastly spectrum ranging from mild cases where arms or legs or others parts had to be
 81 severed to the bleak cases where water was provided till life took a flight from their bodies.
 82 The mortal remains were then transferred to the playing field of a local government school
 83 and were spread across the field, like vegetables in a green house, for their relatives to
 84 identify. It was a macabre sight, we couldn't always provide whole bodies; sometimes it was
 85 limbs only, and other times it was the trunk of the forgotten workers and some just had to
 86 wait since hundreds of bodies couldn't be retrieved or accounted for. Eerily, it resembled
 87 some form of industrial genocide.



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 89 A week after, while rescue efforts were still going on, I reluctantly left the site to continue
 90 work at my hospital. As I walked the corridors of my wards again, I was a different person,
 91 more grateful, more responsible and a more conscious consumer of apparels. Now, I was
 92 more forbearing, I listened to my patients more intently, I cared for their every sigh, I gave
 93 people more time than before. I cherished every smile; I valued life more. It took a massive
 94 industrial disaster to shake me out of my callousness towards the world we inhabit, to bring
 95 voice to the people who like the factory workers are buried under poverty, who have no
 96 weapons to fight this war of consumerism, whose eyes are filled with as much hope as tears.
 97 Maybe in that rubble, I had buried the old me who took life for granted.



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