

“A Burning India” – Pandemic Crisis and Response From American Physician Associations

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Our sincere acknowledgments to family, friends and world citizens who have lost their loved ones in the COVID-19 pandemic.

India is being hit hard by a second wave of COVID-19 illness. The rate of COVID infection and a related mortality surge is crushing this country of a billion people. Record daily new cases have depleted resources and torn the health care system asunder. The lack of supplies has worsened to the extent that basic necessities such as oxygen have become unavailable, leaving patients and their families distraught. A scarcity of hospital beds, essential medications, and advanced life support systems has shattered the public.

How and why did India get so badly hit by a second wave of COVID? Multiple mutant viruses, slow vaccination rates, and/or social distance compromises have all been discussed as potential medical explanations.

As a country, India set an excellent humanitarian example by sharing their medicines and COVID vaccines with the frontline workers in many countries, well before full vaccination (or hoarding) occurred by their own citizenry. Early in the pandemic, India’s caseload was not high and many countries would have been left in limbo without India’s medicine and vaccination aid to their frontline medical workers. The strategy of India was to save those who could be saved in the present. These efforts were applauded globally.

The recent pandemic crisis in India has been criticized for various reasons, but what is unfortunate is that the criticism arrived before vital support. From our own experience in the United States, we know very well that during the surge we also struggled to obtain basic medical care and supplies. The U.S. encountered this crisis while being one of the most prosperous countries in the world, with a much lower population. How can it be possible for India, a country of a billion people, to control this outbreak without shortages?

Non-medical corporations have rushed to support the vulnerable country early on in highly commendable and humanistic efforts. Smaller local organizations, non-profit organizations, groups of Indian physicians abroad and local physician groups have also not left any area untouched in seeking to help distressed fellow Indians.

Yet it is miserable and shocking that in this disaster, established U.S. organized national physician groups are missing in appropriate compassionate action. Most large physician organizations, such as the American Medical Association (AMA), American College of Physicians (ACP), American College of Cardiology (ACC), and many more sub-specialty organizations have a high percentage of Indian physician or Indian-origin physician members. Have their voices been heard within these organizations? We believe it is the ethical responsibility of these organizations to help ease the crisis in India. The COVID-19

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pandemic surge is not a political crisis, but a medical calamity, and each of these physician organizations holds a basic mission aiming for the betterment of public health. Public health support should not be limited to a state, country, or ethnicity, but move above and beyond to help wherever it is most needed. At this point, India’s medical need is foremost. Many of our physician member groups and organizations have failed to act in supporting the citizens of India. Did we fail humanity? Probably, yes.

The crisis in India has deepened to the point of compromising necessary non-medical necessities such as cremation. There is a lack of crematorium sites, and those that exist are already running at high cost due to high demand. People already burdened with treatment costs cannot afford funerals. Many dead bodies have been found floating in one of the largest holy rivers in India. Such a huge catastrophe should not be ignored and needs an immediate relief effort.

At this point, the U.S. is not in crisis; the number of cases in our country is now controlled. At the same time, a country of billion citizens is suffering and struggling. Anything and everything would be a great comfort. Our medical associations could take the lead in supporting and working to save humankind. We call upon our medical and physician organizations to arise, awake, and act with kindness and swiftness to help our fellow humans suffering in India. ■



Note from author Kusum Lata, MD:

Our condolences to the family of Prabhat Kumar, MD, Interventional Cardiologist, Patna, Bihar, India, who lost his life May 18, 2021, battling COVID-19. Dr. Kumar, your hard work and commitment to cardiology and your patients will remain forever. May you rest in peace.

Though I am an American citizen, I was born and raised in India for quite some time, and have many friends and family there. Seeing my friends and family suffering, as well as all Indians, is very painful. On a personal level, I have made myself available to them as much as I can from here in the U.S. Many of our physicians here are doing the same. I was surprised and sad to see that there are no actions of support from our large medical associations. In the current world, I want to be a world citizen, acting above and beyond any boundaries. This is what we are supposed to do as physicians and human beings.

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