

Sandhani—An Overview

Ruhul Amin Mazumder

SANDHANI believes that Government anywhere, more so in a poor country like ours, cannot solve all the problems of the society. Sandhani also recognizes that every individual, rich or poor, has some capacity to contribute to the well being of his community, in his own way, within his own means, in his life time and even after his death. Unless every individual discharges his responsibility to the society to the best of his ability, government alone with limited resources at its disposal cannot take care of every problem of the society.

On the 5th February, 1977 a group of six 2nd year students of Dhaka Medical College, out of their love and affection for a fellow student, decided to raise a sum of Taka 5.00 per month to provide breakfast to him as he was attending his classes without any food upto lunch time. These six students formed an association no doubt, but they did not have any clear vision about how their activities will shape up or in what direction they will proceed further. Sandhani was born on that albeit the name was chosen few days later. Paul Harris started Rotary, Mother Teresa laid the foundation of the Home of Charity, Professor Ibrahim began his Diabetic Association with such modest beginning.

For some time these young medical students grouped in the dark. They wanted to do more not only for their class fellow but for the society at large. But being young and with hardly any experience of the vast world outside, they did not know which route to track.

Like a beacon in the dark horizon appeared Professor Habibur Rahman, then the head of Blood Bank of DMC. He was very much impressed with the zeal and commitment of these youngsters. He guided them, he led them and he inspired them. Under his active participation the first voluntary blood donation programme in the country was organized in DMC on the 2nd November, 1978. Professor Rahman was the first donor. Another 26 persons, mostly students, followed.

It was no doubt a very modest start. Over the years Sandhani has expanded its activities beyond blood. Today Sandhani is a household name. Be it blood or medicines or eyes, people come to Sandhani for sure and instant help.

Sandhani's auxiliary organisation, Sandhani National Eye Donation Society was born on the 24th November, 1984. The baptism ceremony was conducted by the world famous pioneer of posthumous eye donation from Sri Lanka, Dr Hudson de Silva. Also was present on the occasion blind Tun Tun, the young girl whose eyesight was subsequently restored by Karatoplasty through corneas collected by Sandhani. SNEDS collects cornea from dead people (the posthumous eye donors), grafts them in

the eyes of blind people and gives them eyesight.

If there is a loss of blood in a human body due to internal or external haemorrhage, it has to be filled up by only human blood. If the loss is not replenished, the man is sure to die.

The main causes for blood loss are injuries due to accidents (very common in our country; hundreds of thousands every year,) surgical operations and anaemia. Fresh blood alone can take care of the first two categories of people. Unless enough blood is transfused in time, survival chances of the victims become very uncertain.

Bangladesh needs every year 2.5 lac bags of blood. Sandhani, Red Crescent, other voluntary organizations and the relatives of patients provide about 0.8 lac bags. The balance demand is met by professional blood sellers. It must be noted that blood collected from professional sellers is of low quality. Very often blood from this source carries the germs and virus of infectious diseases.

That brings into focus the importance of voluntary blood donation and the crucial role played by Sandhani. If larger number of able bodied and healthy people could be motivated to donate blood, people needing blood did not have to fall back on the professional blood sellers.

Holding blood donation programmes at offices, clubs or community centers from time to time helps no doubt but blood collected in this process cannot meet the total national demand.

Today blood can be donated at the Sandhani centers which are located in all the medical colleges of the country. However, for people who are otherwise willing to donate blood but cannot reach upto medical colleges, some practical alternatives have to be worked out. Blood donation programmes cannot be organized as often as are required. Since these are organized at the initiative of some professional groups or institutions, the general public do not have any information nor can they avail such opportunities to donate blood. Easily accessible blood donation centers should be established all over the country, open at least once a week. Unless Sandhani can adequately expand its activities, donated blood will continue to be short of actual demand.

Another hurdle in the way of blood collection is the lack of awareness about the gravity of the problem. The potential blood donors are at times ignorant about the urgency of blood donation; some of them have wrong information and taboos also.

Most unfortunate is the fact that donors are not socially recognized.

Have you heard of anybody who has been given a national award for being the highest donor in a particular year? It is time we woke up and recognized these worthy sons of the soil.

We have got to educate our people and create an awareness about the need for every able person to donate blood. Sandhani has been doing this job for the last 20 years but in a country of 120 million population Sandhani's drum beating can reach hardly 10% of the people. Then there are the financial and manpower constraints. At times blood cannot be collected for sheer shortage of bags!

The story of eye donation is very different. Here the donation takes effect after death. During a man or woman's life time all that is needed is a pledge for posthumous donation.

About 4 million people in the country are blind due to malnutrition, diarrhoea, measles and injuries caused by accidents. These people are totally unproductive and a liability to the society. You see them begging at traffic points, railway stations, mosques, market places and everywhere. Eye sight can be restored to more than 75% of these people through Karatoplasty or grafting of fresh cornea in their eyes. They can be converted from a sheer liability to a positive asset.

To carry out such a surgery we need corneas from dead bodies within 4 to 6 hours of their death. Corneas of the dead people can be extracted only if they had donated them during life time.

Since its birth Sandhani National Eye Donation Society has involved itself in eye donation, cornea extraction and cornea grafting. Upto now the society has been able to obtain pledge for posthumous eye donation from more than 25 thousand people. It has extracted 980 corneas and successfully grafted 901 corneas and restored eyesight to most of the patients. But again compared to the magnitude of the problem, solution has been far from spectacular. In a country like Sri Lanka, donations are in excess of demand. Corneas from Sri Lanka are sent abroad on a regular basis.

Sandhani's problems with eye collection are much more complicated than those for blood collection. A donor of blood takes decision and donates his blood when an opportunity arises. Not so is the case with the eye donor. He pledges posthumous eye donation and leaves it to his heirs/relations to execute his pledge. After death, the grief stricken relations of the dead donor have very little time or mental condition to contact Sandhani to extract his cornea. More often they do not take the donation seriously; at times it is also difficult to contact Sandhani and

arrange extraction within six hours from death. In some cases, the relations create problems and prevent Sandhani from doing its job.

The response to eye donation pledge is not very satisfactory. Here again the potential donors suffer from fear and superstitions; religious taboos also create handicaps. It should be clearly stated that there is no religious or legal bar to blood or posthumous eye donation. All religions encourage us to use all our resources to do everything possible to serve humanity.

To motivate people to donate blood and eyes political leaders, social workers, cultural and sports activists can set examples by donating their blood and eyes. Their examples will be followed by others.

Sandhani organizes blood donation and give the blood free of cost to hospitals and private clinics for transfusion to deserving patients. It does not conduct any blood transfusion as it has no such facilities.

Similarly, Sandhani Eye Donation Society collects corneas from dead donors and gives the same free of cost to the eye surgeons in the hospitals and private clinics. They in their turn graft them in the eyes of the blind patients in the waiting list serially, on the basis of first come, first served.

Karatoplasty i.e., grafting of the cornea is an expensive exercise. As a result, very poor people cannot take advantage of the corneas donated by benevolent persons and collected and made available free of cost by Sandhani. The situation could be reversed if Sandhani had its own eye bank and fully equipped eye hospitals at Dhaka and other major cities of the country. Its services would then reach those who deserve them most. Sandhani would then not depend on expensive surgeons/clinics for grafting the corneas.

The Honourable Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina has promised Sandhani a piece of land in Dhaka. The location of the land has not yet been finalized. We hope it will be at a convenient area where the donors as well as the recipients can reach easily. Ideally, it should be close to other hospitals. Once the land is available, funds will be raised and a full fledged Sandhani Complex will be built with facilities for blood and eye donation, blood transfusion and Karatoplasty. Post operation and follow up care of the patients will automatically come in. All these services will be provided without any fees. Maximum number of people will then get Sandhani services at minimum cost.

Is that day too far away when Sandhani Complex will serve the distressed and deserving people of Bangladesh like BIRDEM and Diabetic centres? Your awareness and your support is all that we need.

(The writer is President, Sandhani National Eye Donation Society).