

# Establishment of a post-COVID clinic

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(*BIRDEM Med J 2020; 10, COVID Supplement: 103-104*)

Corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is an unprecedented health crisis at the global scale. Since early 2020, it has put enormous pressure on healthcare systems, unsettled economies and halted large parts of social life in many countries across the world. Bangladesh reported its first case on March 8, 2020. The first death was reported on 18th March and the death toll exceeded 6000 on December 2. However, many patients who survive COVID-19, continue to struggle an array of long-drawn-out, often difficult-to-understand symptoms. This hypothesis came to light from the experiences of physicians who gave consultation to a growing number of patients whose initial battle with COVID-19 are behind them, yet they continue to deal with long-lasting fatigue, difficulty in concentrating or focusing, respiratory issues, cardiac and vascular problems, neurological concerns as well as support for issues related to prolonged Intensive care unit stay such as loss of muscle, myopathy, neuropathy, anxiety and depression. These people sometimes describe themselves as “long haulers” and the condition has been called post-COVID-19 syndrome or “long COVID-19”. In the absence of agreed definitions, some authorities have defined ‘post-acute COVID-19’ as symptoms extending beyond three weeks from the onset of first symptoms and ‘chronic COVID-19’ as extending beyond 12 weeks.<sup>1</sup> Some of the symptoms that have been linked to chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), though most people who develop it following COVID-19, do not meet the diagnostic criteria for CFS.

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**Received:** November 30, 2020

**Revision received:** December 11, 2020

**Accepted:** December 15, 2020

There are no precise statistics on the number of patients who, in theory, have recovered from the worst impacts of the COVID, tested negative, but still have symptoms lasting weeks or months. Since COVID-19 is a very new disease, even till today, it is difficult to say on a numerical basis about how many patients are suffering from post-COVID issues. However, studies estimate that around 10% of patients who were tested positive for COVID-19 remain unwell beyond three weeks and a smaller proportion for months. This is based on the UK COVID Symptom Study, in which people enter their ongoing symptoms on a smart-phone app. This percentage is lower than that cited in many published observational studies<sup>2,3</sup> whose denominator population were those admitted to hospital or attending specialist clinics. A recent US study found that only 65% of people had returned to their previous level of health, 14-21 days after a positive test.<sup>4</sup>

These COVID-19 survivors, deserve to have their symptoms evaluated in a systematic fashion. Rather than consulting different physicians time to time and not getting all of their issues evaluated at once, the goal of the physician should be, to evaluate them comprehensively, find the causes and involve specialists to their care teams as needed. Furthermore, due to the novelty of the disease, the exact nature of ongoing deficits is uncertain and needs to be established and tracked over time by *creating a registry to trace important clinical statistics*.

Considering these issues, the Respiratory Medicine Department of BIRDEM General Hospital has taken the initiative to start a post-COVID clinic, where the post COVID-19 patients will continue their journey to recovery by holistic model of care including pulmonary care and rehabilitation, pulmonary function testing, pulmonary imaging and services related to physical medicine and psychiatric issues, as well as research studies related to COVID-19. The clinic runs every Thursday in BIRDEM specialist chamber complex, Room-210/10, from 9 am to 11 am. We have come across numerous patients who complained of having

post COVID symptoms. So far, the clinic has given service to approximately 200 patients till mid December. According to recent knowledge, some other tertiary care hospitals in Dhaka, Bangladesh, are also planning to take such initiative and some of them have already started giving service to such patients through post-COVID clinic. As per our experience, many of the patients who were very ill, have been able to return to their normal level of functioning within two to three months.

Meanwhile, taking into account the suffuse and unequal impact of COVID-19<sup>5,6</sup> and the experience in the post-COVID clinic, different countries of the world like USA, UK, India etc have inaugurated community level cross-sector collaborations to develop locally relevant solutions. A recent report from general practice in a deprived area of Glasgow describes the importance of accessible, relationship-based care for patients with complex needs and significance of system-level interventions such as attached financial advisers and outreach mental health services.<sup>7</sup>In the upcoming days, we may face a fresh challenge to control an outbreak that we had contained to a considerable extent. As full recovery is essential for all patients, clinics like these are expected to play a major role in ensuring that.

**Authors' contribution:** FA did literature search and drafted manuscript. MDH planned publication was overall supervisor.

**Conflicts of interest:** Nothing to declare.

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