

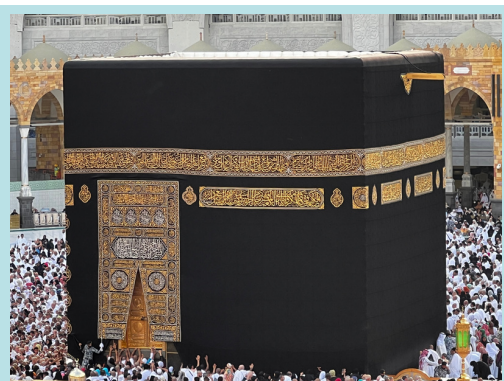
# HAJJ STORIES

## CRY FOR HELP UNHEARD

JANUARY 2023

He looked like Allah had recalled him. He was laying outside the Haram in Makkah, his head on a piece of cloth with a small bag next to him. Many Hujjaaj reside far away from the Haram and tend to stay in or close to the Holy Mosque for the bulk of the day. There are ablution facilities spread all around and, whilst some would scoff at the level of cleanliness, it meant that many did not have to trek back to their far-flung hotels five times a day. He did not appear to be breathing. Thin but not malnourished, small with not a speck of fat to be detected on his body. He was evidently from a rural part of Asia. I stopped and observed for signs of life. Hundreds walked past him, and one or two even brushed against him due to the massive crowds.

As I leaned over him I noted a slight raising of his chest, evidence that he was breathing. A few moments later he made a slight adjustment to his sleeping position. I was immensely relieved. In Islam we are always encouraged to visit and pray for the sick. On occasion it could be an unknown stranger who suddenly collapses who needs assistance and at other times it could be related to trauma. Sometimes we are oblivious to a cry for help and a failure to act may scar us for life. 'If only I knew or if only they told me that they are suffering,' are words we all utter at some time or the other. I left the gentleman and as I walked, noted many in a similar situation to him. My awareness that something may possibly be wrong was raised by a disturbing conversation I had the day before when I was consulted by a clearly traumatized patient.



Hajj: a time to listen

I had a hectic day two days before at the clinic with many pilgrims presenting with respiratory infections. It was ten days to go before the first day of hajj was to commence. Many patients were concerned that they would not recover by the time the most important journey of their lives climaxes. They needed a great amount of reassurance that they would indeed be fine as

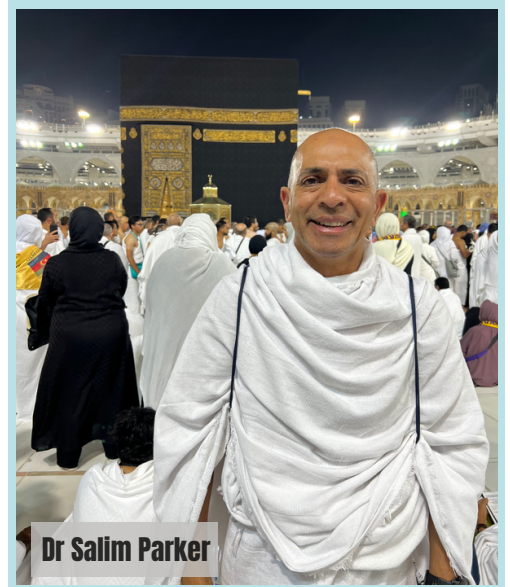
long as they took the prescribed medicine and rested. I emphasized the rest part as many pilgrims tended to physically exert themselves cramming in as many activities as possible. By the time the days of Hajj start they would be exhausted with their impaired immune systems making them prone to infections. Some elderly merely needed advice about how to use their chronic medication and their smiles and contentment hearing that all will be well on the Day of Arafat was more than enough reward for the time spent with them.

***'A child cried, but no one wanted to hear, a child was dying but no one was caring, a child died and only then do we want to act'***

He was my very last patient. Young, with an evident cough, I thought it would be a straightforward case and initially it certainly appeared that way. He had a high fever, had a sore throat, was wheezing at night when he coughed and had body aches. 'The classic Hajj flu,' I told him and, as usual, reassured him that rest and using the medication would have him fit as a fiddle within a few days. 'I cannot rest,' he replied. I looked at him more carefully. Yes, he looked sick initially but the anxiety and sadness were evident now that I looked for it. We as doctors, after a busy day, sometimes only pay attention to the presenting symptoms. The downward gaze, the monosyllable answers, the disengaging affect and the generally negative reports on his journey so far should have alerted me much earlier that he was severely depressed.

I asked him a few more questions and indicated to him that he was severely depressed. He acknowledged it but indicated that he felt too sick to talk about it. We agreed to chat at breakfast the next morning if he felt better. He was already seated at a table the next morning when I got to the breakfast area. He felt physically much better but was still feeling extremely down. He was travelling alone and paid extra in order not to share a room with someone. He was from a different continent and attended our medical clinic as his group resided in the same hotel as we did. We chatted about his health and his life. 'I hate cats,' he suddenly remarked. The intensity and suddenness of the phrase clearly needed to be explored further.

'There are a number of stray cats where I live and their crying and screeching at times really drives me crazy,' he said. I could not link it to his



Dr Salim Parker

depression and gently asked him why it would have affected him so much. 'There was one evening where one or two of them were meowing like babies. I then heard another sound which

sounded slightly different. I actually thought it strange and this sound subsided afterwards. I remember the sound bothering me. There was still some meowing later on but that did not disturb me and I fell asleep afterwards. I live in a block of flats and the next morning I was told by a neighbour that the body of an abandoned baby was found close by. If I had investigated that different sound that baby may have been alive. I did not even get up, I did nothing, and that led to the death of the child.'

This type of case was not going to be resolved in one session whilst consuming a meal. With his permission we got two religious scholars involved, one each from our respective groups. We had to intensively counsel him from a medical, religious, psychological and moral perspective. 'A child cried, but no one wanted to hear, a child was dying but no one was caring, a child died and only then do we want to act,' are his words that will forever be etched in my memory. He came on Hajj specifically to atone for his perceived transgression. He realised that he was probably going to need long term intervention and was willing to be helped. He was in a much better space when we finally went to Mina on the first day of Hajj.

He was not in our camp, and I only met him two days after Hajj. 'I asked so much for forgiveness and firmly believe in the Mercy of Allah,' he told me. 'A child died, but you are alive,' I replied. 'It is time for you to live.' He looked at me. 'I said Labaik, I have arrived, when I started my Hajj. When I departed Arafat I really felt that I was a new person. I make Duaa that it is a good and God-fearing person,' he said. Deep in our hearts we all make the same Duaa.

| salimparker@yahoo.com