

HAJJ STORIES

FINAL RESTING PLACE

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'He is so blessed! He passed away whilst in Ihram!' the Islamic scholar said. The pilgrim was admitted to hospital a day after returning from Arafat and had not finished all the rites of Hajj yet. His condition deteriorated and Allah recalled him about two days later. I listened to the scholar and found it ironic that years earlier, after a stampede on Mina during which more than two thousand were trampled to death, he expressed immense relief that he just missed being caught in that tragedy. Everyone on Mina wanted to live, others far away from the southern tip of Africa to north Canada spoke of how lucky the martyrs were.

It is difficult to think of dying when caught in such a melee and think of the blessings associated with it. I was with a fellow doctor when it happened one street away from where we were but our attempts to assist were blocked by the rapidly deployed army. Death, I know it is part of life. As doctors we want to prevent death amongst fellow humans or, if inevitable, let it be as dignified as possible. In this Haaji's case I was left with very uncertain emotions, questioning my judgements and again becoming acutely aware of our limitations as doctors.

He consulted me about a week before Hajj was to start. He had heart problems before leaving South Africa but was considered stable enough to embark on the journey when his group departed for Madinah. He unfortunately had a medical event in the City of Peace and was hospitalized there. He did receive world-class treatment but had considerable residual heart damage leaving him very dependent on his wheelchair. He had considerable fluid retention which led to severely swollen feet. This led to considerable pain when he walked. He needed astronomical doses of water tablets which helped him to pass out the retained fluid in his urine. Unfortunately, this meant that he had to walk to the bathroom, and this was excruciatingly painful. This led him to miss doses on occasions thereby aggravating the swelling. It was truly a vicious cycle.



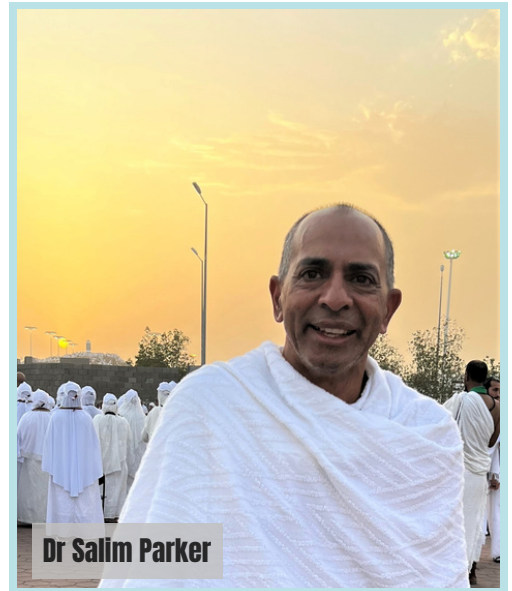
Even a few moments on Arafat suffices for Hajj

'We are going to get you to Arafat,' I said determinedly. He looked sick and tired, but he had Hajj as motivation. He had hope radiating from his eyes. We discussed in detail how we would handle his medical condition. I explained in detail that we need to ensure that he does not have excess fluid and worked out a strategy where we could control his pain when he put pressure on his feet and take his tablets to eliminate the excess fluid. We planned that he would stay in Azizyah for the first day of Hajj. 'Hajj is Arafat,' I gently tried to persuade him. If you have to sit in a confined space in Mina and have poor access to the toilets, you will feel really sick on the Day of Wuqoof. I would rather have you resting in your room in comfort, and we'll arrange for transport straight to Arafat the next day,' I advised. He reluctantly agreed.

"We got to Arafat, now we need to complete all our duties and get home"

I called on him the next day and from all accounts he was better. It was extremely hot and we had to balance the thirst cycle and the desire to quench it with fluid not overloading him, and ensuring he takes his tablets. For us as medical personnel the ultimate aim is to get our pilgrims to Arafat in a comfortable enough state so that they have the strength to connect with their Creator. There have been occasions where our aim was to ensure terminally ill guests of Allah live long enough to at least set their feet on Arafat. There were those who did not make it, others who just made it and then made peace with being recalled before the sun set on the vast plains on that great Day. In his case we were confident that we would manage to get him to at least at the time of Wuqoof and get him back to the comfort of his room the same night. We would then decide how to approach the other rites in consultation with the scholars.

'Doc, I have a sick person who needs urgent attention.' I could hear the panic in my friend's voice. I was attending to a lady who collapsed in a tent on Arafat just after arriving there. It was still early morning but it felt like a furnace. My friend already escorted two ladies who collapsed as they walked from the bus to our camp to a roadside clinic. He was at our medical tent and as soon as the lady was stable, I rushed there. He had wheeled in my water retention patient, whose legs were three times its normal size. It appeared that either he was not taking his medication, or he needed higher doses. He was short of breath, extremely fatigued and had heat exhaustion. We stabilized him, but he worried me. All his readings were stable, but somehow I was uneasy about his demeanor.



'We got to Arafat, now we need to complete all our duties and get home,' I said. He looked up, but instead of the determined glow that was present before, there was this gaze far beyond me. I do not know when people just give up, but I was determined that medical science would prevail. I ensured that he had a comfortable spot in his tent and checked up on him on occasion. He seemed stable, but I was not happy. 'Hajj is

Arafat, everything else can be delayed, done on your behalf, or a penalty can be paid for. Let us admit you to hospital,' I suggested. He refused but agreed to be taken straight back from Arafat to his room and take his medication. He pledged to call me once he got there. He never did.

The heat affected a number of our pilgrims and we were kept busy during the day. I had a physically uneventful but immensely spiritually fulfilling journey to Muzdalifah, Mina and Makkah. I made my way to Azizyah and tried contacting him but failed to get hold of him. His wife contacted me the next day indicating that he was not well and I urged him to go to hospital. By now I was in Mina and it was impossible for me to go see him. I did not hear from them until later when I was informed that he was rushed to hospital after suddenly deteriorating. Sadly, he suffered from multi organ failure and Allah recalled him. Several South Africans were able to attend his Janaza.

I still wonder what the outcome would have been if I had insisted that he be admitted to hospital on the day of Arafat. There are times when all our tests and investigations show that a patient is stable, but where a doctor's gut feeling says otherwise. My mind and the science said we were right, my instinct differed. His resting place is in the Holy Land after reaching Arafat. May Allah grant him the highest place in Janah.