

Arafat is not always the time to leave this world

Dr Salim Parker

‘I heard Allah calling me,’ he said. I could not ascertain whether he was saying it in jest or not, as our cellphone connection was very poor. Millions were simultaneously using the modern day wonder and distraction of instant communication and social media to relay the indescribable atmosphere of travelling from Arafat to Musdalifah and then on to Mina a few hours after having been as close to their Creator as would ever be possible during the time of Wuqoof. I was already on the border of Musdalifah and Mina, and it was a few minutes before midnight, when hundreds of thousands would start the journey to go pelt the Jamarats. ‘I am fine now, and my son is pushing me in a wheelchair to Musdalifah,’ he continued. ‘The hospital here on Arafat discharged me,’ he added. I was immensely relieved. Just a few hours earlier, when I found him in a delirious state just before sunset on Arafat, I was furiously involved in a life and death situation.

We were busy with our final duaa on Arafat when I was summonsed to his tent. He was a severe diabetic and it was immediately evident that his sugar levels were very high and off the scale. He had glazy eyes and responded very animatedly to commands but did not communicate verbally. Millions were getting ready to start moving from the plains of Arafat and it was impossible to easily walk between them. I immediately called for an ambulance even before I started examining him as it was an evident medical emergency. He was administered fluids through a drip but no one could tell us what exactly was given. Sometimes the symptoms of too much or too little of a particular blood chemical can be deceptively similar. Giving too much of a particular salt or diluting the already very little that might be present through the incorrect use through a drip can both lead to fatal heart rhythms. It was imperative that we got him to a hospital so that we could measure these substances in a laboratory and

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treat him appropriately.

It took the ambulance about an hour to arrive. A doctor employed by the Hajj authorities was on board and immediately agreed that admission to hospital was paramount. This doctor then left with another vehicle to attend to another emergency. We readied our patient and were about to stretch him onto the ambulance when someone shouted from an adjacent camp that there was another emergency. The ambulance personnel very quickly ascertained that this second emergency was a pilgrim from another African country but who unfortunately had already passed away in a state of Ihram on the plains of Arafat. A light shroud was placed over him and he was immediately put in the ambulance. Much to our surprise the ambulance driver insisted on taking the corpse to the hospital first. He

pledged to return immediately for our patient. ‘The living takes precedence over the dead!’ I pleaded, indicated that every minute was of vital importance. ‘If you save one life it is as if you saved the whole of humanity,’ an Islamic scholar who witnessed the incident succinctly advised, referring to a verse from the Holy Quran. The ambulance personnel would have none of it and immediately drove off at a pace even slower than that of the slowest walking pilgrim.

I started panicking and our patient’s condition was deteriorating rapidly. He was now not even responding to simple commands and sat staring fixatedly somewhere towards Jabal Rahmah, the previously white covered Mountain of Mercy now nearly completely enshrouded by the darkness of the night. Maybe it was at this time that he heard Allah calling him. We are all told that those who pass away in Ihram on Arafat will surely go straight to Heaven. We as doctors are always told that you do your utmost to preserve life. As far as I was concerned he had a very treatable condition. We just needed to get him to hospital and do a few blood tests! I again had the health authorities phoned and was promised that an ambulance would be dispatched immediately. We felt every minute pass agonisingly. What felt like an eternity, but was actually less than thirty minutes, it finally pulled up with sirens screaming.

I rushed up to the driver to explain the gravity of the situation. I immediately recognised him. It was the same ambulance that was there previously. I walked to the back of the vehicle and my suspicion was confirmed; the corpse was still there. There was no way that the ambulance could have reached the hospital and returned within that timeframe in that crowd. The driver shrugged his shoulders. ‘We thought we had to come stabilise a sick person,’ he said. They had no intention of transporting any living person to hospital in the same corpse-carrying vehicle. ‘We’ll put our patient in the wheelchair or on a stretcher and be very respectful of the body of the deceased,’ I pleaded. The vehicle was very well equipped and I could have started basic resuscitation whilst we were on route to hospital. The driver was having none of it and he mumbled something about protocol. I frustratingly again screamed about the rights of those alive taking precedence over the dead. Having a scholar repeating my words simply fell onto deaf ears. The driver shrugged his shoulders, got into the ambulance and drove off even slower than previously. Backward hopping on one foot in Ihram I would have probably moved faster.

It was dark by now and yet there were still massive crowds around, mostly on the roads walking or making their way to their buses. The camps were relatively empty. The hospital was a few roads away and we realised that pushing him in wheelchair amongst the crowds and bumper to bumper vehicles was probably going to take hours. We scanned the camps and realised that all the gates were opened as the free exit for pilgrims had to be guaranteed. We made him as comfortable as humanly possible on the broken wheelchair and took a shortcut through the camps to

the hospital. Some camps only had sand paths, others rough pebbles, a few had gravel patches and only one or two decent paved paths. Three of us took turns to push the wheelchair and we managed to get to the hospital within twenty minutes.

The hospital was staffed by specialists and within a minute of his situation being explained, he was admitted and prompt investigations and treatment commenced. Blood chemical abnormalities were immediately identified and appropriate

remedial intravenous solutions given. I was supposed to accompany a group walking from Arafat but the medical emergency clearly took precedence. As soon as I knew that he was being taken care of in a world class facility, I left and tried to catch up with the group who had departed about two hours before me. Unfortunately they took a path completely separate to the road the hospital was on and though I was in constant telephonic communication with them, I never met them. In fact in my haste to reach them, I somehow reached the border of Mina an hour before them even though I started two hours later.

It was the first time in fifteen years that I walked alone. Me, my backpack and my medicine bag with the latter coming in very handy for a number of pilgrims needing medical assistance along the way. It was whilst I was sitting on the border of Musdalifah waiting for midnight to arrive when he called to say he has been discharged and was on his way. Allah may have called him, but Allah decided to forgive him of all his sins so that he can return to all of us as free of sins and as innocent as a new-born child.

salimparker@yahoo.com



Pilgrims await the arrival of midnight on the border of Musdalifah and Mina.