

The Gift of Being More than One

Dr Salim Parker

'Please do not exert yourself. Yes, you are young, healthy and pregnancy is a natural state. However you are on Hajj, and Hajj is a physically demanding journey in a country and in conditions that are taxing on the body. Of course we do not want you to isolate yourself in a room, we just advise caution. Crowds during peak Tawaaf times can be a melee of pushing and shoving groups. The mild pleasant temperatures we experienced in South Africa are nowhere close to the record high ones that we were encountering in Saudi Arabia, and the amount of travelling, whether by foot or bus, is something that most of us are not accustomed to. The Saudi Hajj Ministry provides world class facilities for pregnant ladies and there is always excitement when the first baby is born on Arafat.' This is standard medical advice we give to all pregnant ladies and in one particular year I interacted with four such ladies a few days before Hajj was due to commence. Most acceded to the request to do everything in moderation. One decided not to, with unfortunate consequences.

Everything in our lives is ultimately decided by our Creator and no one will ever dispute that. 'Your life and body is a garden that Allah has blessed you with; you have to water the plants, remove the weeds and tend to the blooming flowers and flourishing vegetable patches yourself,' a wise person once said. I used the same phrase when I consulted the pregnant ladies. They all felt infinitely blessed to be on Hajj with a new bud blossoming inside them. The medical team reiterated that they were not only considering the health of the mother but also that of the unborn child. We were often asked whether certain activities could be undertaken. Some were easily answered. A shopping trip from Makkah to Jeddah in an overcrowded unreliable old bus was a definitely not to be embarked on. The fact that the bus broke down and left the pilgrims stranded for hours vindicated our advice.

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It was not always that easy to guide the ladies. One mentioned the desire to perform an additional Umrah on behalf of a deceased a few days before Hajj. The congestion in Makkah, the oppressive heat and prohibitively expensive transport costs pointed against it. However she had a good support structure, and a number of others in the group pledged to go with her and her husband. 'Hajj is Arafat, and everything you do will count for nothing if you do not get to Arafat,' we reiterated. They understood, and they were extremely sensible about performing their Umrah, pledging to return if there were any problems. When she was tired or the crowds were too heavy during the Tawaaf, they simply sat down, drank Zamzam, admired the Kab'aa and recited until it was easier to continue. They started their Umrah late in the evening



As attractive as the picture might be, the crowds during Tawaaf can be physically challenging.

and only finished just before sunrise. It was a deeply moving and bonding experience for all of them. There was no rush, and every delay was considered a blessing to spend more time in the Holiest Mosque of all.

One of the groups wanted to walk the entire Hajj. They would set off from Azizya and walk a few kilometres to Mina on the first day of Hajj. The second day they planned to walk the 15km to Arafat in temperatures close to 50 degrees. Their group leaders gave them a practice walk a few days before Hajj from Azizya to Mina and virtually all decided that they would rather take the bus on the actual day that would herald the beginning of a new life for them. We treated a number of those on the practice walk for anything from fatigue and heat exhaustion to dehydration as they were not used to such extreme weather conditions. The sick, frail, elderly and especially the pregnant ladies were convinced that walking was not a good idea.

The medical team also went to the other groups and advised the vulnerable against walking. 'But hundreds of thousands, if not millions will be walking,' someone protested. We reminded them that that is indeed so, but those were people used to walking and used to such weather conditions. They would probably suffer in a bus! We South Africans affected by western comfort and afflicted by its concomitant diseases of lifestyle were not all prepared for it.

For some reason she, unlike the other pregnant ladies, decided to walk on the first day. I accompanied a group of elderly Hadjies and merely helping them on and off the bus had me drenched in sweat. She came to see me and complained of bleeding. She was exhausted and had the additional worry about her baby. We tried reassuring her that there were world class medical facilities right on our doorsteps and immediately referred her. The hospital stabilised her and she re-joined her group. She was very compliant, rested in her

tent and awaited the arrival of the most significant day in the life of any Muslim; the day of Arafat.

She reached Arafat and again rested as advised in her air-conditioned tent. However her Creator decreed that all will not go according to all our prayers. She started bleeding clots and it was very soon evident, just after midday, that she had a miscarriage. She was rushed to hospital and the necessary procedures were performed. Life was complicated for her as she was booked to fly home a week later. Hajj is Arafat but one of the absolute requirements of a completed Hajj was the compulsory Tawaaf. She subscribed to a Mathaab that required her to only perform this Tawaaf once she is ritually pure, and that would only be possible after a few months. She could stay in Makkah until she was ritually clean. The other option was for her to return to South Africa and come back to perform her Tawaaf a few months later whilst all the time being in a state of Ihram. Her final option was to return the following year or in the years thereafter and complete her whole Hajj.

Two days later, on the first day of Tashriq, the day of pelting, a pregnant lady accompanied by her husband came to ask my advice about stoning at midday. The authorities sent out warnings after the massive stampede that occurred the day before and killed thousands. I was stern and direct in my advice about her not going. She was convinced that it was unsafe but her husband was having none of it and they set off, returning a few hours later. 'See, it all went well,' the husband said, pointing triumphantly at his clearly exhausted and miserable wife. All I can say is that I was ecstatic that both she and her baby were well.

salimparker@yahoo.com
www.hajjdoctor.co.za