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COVID-19 patients struggle to get into Ahmedabad hospitals even as bodies keep coming out

CHAHAT RANA

24 April 2021



A COVID-19 patient who was refused admission at the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Hospital in Ahmedabad on 17 April, sits in an ambulance outside the hospital. SHAHID TANTRAY FOR THE CARAVAN

COVID-19



(/covid-19)

On the night of 17 April, Jadiben Chunnilal rushed her 60-year-old husband, Chunnilal, to the trauma centre of Ahmedabad's Sheth Vadilal Sarabhai General Hospital in an autorickshaw. As she and her son struggled to move Chunnilal to a stretcher, security guards outside the trauma centre surrounded them and refused them entrance. "This is a COVID-19 hospital, you will have to find a bed elsewhere," the guard told them.

Jadiben, a frail and elderly woman, wept and pleaded with the guards till they let the stretcher inside. A few minutes later, the same stretcher was carried back out with Chunnilal's body. A member of the hospital staff

declared that he was already dead by the time he arrived at the hospital. “I had searched everywhere for treatment, everywhere,” Jadiben cried. The security guards urged her to load her husband’s body into the auto and leave quickly. “There are more ambulances coming with COVID-19 patients. We can’t let these people dawdle here,” one guard told me. Two ambulances drove up as he completed his sentence.

Ahmedabad ranks tenth in the list of Indian cities with the highest burdens of active COVID-19 cases, with more than 30,000 patients. The city consistently reported more than 3,000 new cases of COVID-19 every day since 17 April, recording 3,914 cases on the evening of 21 April. Official data suggests that between 20 and 25 people died from COVID-19 in the city in the week starting 11 April. However, an employee at the city’s Kagdiwad Municipal crematorium said that at least thirty COVID-19 bodies were cremated there every day. The city has 18 other crematoriums and four cemeteries for COVID-19 bodies. Imtiyaz Ujjainwala, a reporter with the local newspaper *Sandesh*, said he saw 63 dead bodies coming out of the Ahmedabad Civil Hospital, a 1,200-bed government hospital, on a single day. “These are just the bodies I observed coming out of the hospital between 12 am and 5 pm on 12 April,” Ujjainwala told me.



A relative sitting beside the body of a deceased COVID-19 patient at the Ahmedabad Crematorium. SHAHID TANTRAY FOR THE CARAVAN

On the night of 17 April, reporters from *The Caravan* saw lines of ambulances outside hospitals, patients with COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 ailments refused admission, and attendants lining up to collect bodies of family members at the city's hospitals. Outside the Sheth Vadilal Sarabhai Hospital, where Jadiben had taken her husband, ambulance drivers told me that they had been shuttling COVID-19 patients from hospital to hospital for more than six hours, trying to get them admitted.

Vikash Bihan, a young ambulance driver who had driven an 80-year-old patient around, told me he had already been to four hospitals, including the Ahmedabad Civil Hospital, which had refused to admit any new patients. "At least we have oxygen in our ambulances to keep them alive for now, but if this hospital also refuses to admit the patient, I don't know where else to take him," he said. Virendra Parmer, another ambulance driver, told me that this was the third hospital to which he had taken a COVID-19 patient who was still on oxygen support inside the

parked ambulance. “*Haalat bahut kharab hai inki, kab tak saas lenge pata nahi*”—He is in a really bad condition, I don't know how much longer he will continue to breathe—Parmar said.

[🔗 \(https://caravanmagazine.in/health/covid19-patients-struggle-to-get-into-ahmedabad-hospitals/attachment-16988\)](https://caravanmagazine.in/health/covid19-patients-struggle-to-get-into-ahmedabad-hospitals/attachment-16988)



The body of a COVID-19 casualty at the Ahmedabad Crematorium. SHAHID TANTRAY FOR THE CARAVAN

The Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Hospital is a swanky seventeen-storey hospital located next to the dilapidated Sheth Vadilal Sarabhai Hospital building. It was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in early 2019 and it is run by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation. The corporation declared it a dedicated COVID-19 on 9 April following a surge in COVID-19 cases in the city. As a result, non-COVID patients were being turned away.

Rashid Khan was diagnosed with a brain tumor and had undergone treatment for a few months in 2017. He continued to consult the hospital's doctors since then. In early April this year, his health deteriorated again and he started vomiting profusely. On the night of 17 April, the doctors at the hospital said they could not attend to him. “The doctors advised against an operation until this pandemic situation

improves,” Mohammed Sadiq, Khan’s brother-in-law, said. “But at least they could check on him. We went to the reception but they told us to leave, they won't see non-COVID-19 patients anymore. No other place will treat him either, where do we go now?”



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On the Spot: Syed Mohammad



At the entrance of the emergency ward on the other side of the hospital, ambulances ferrying COVID patients had lined up. Relatives scrambled to get their loved ones admitted in time. Apoorva Prajapati, a 26-year-old man from Gandhinagar, spent almost an hour arguing with hospital staff, trying to get his 80-year-old grandfather in. The older man had tested positive for COVID-19 a few days earlier and was on oxygen support

inside the ambulance. “We are from Gandhinagar,” Prajapati said. “We had called this hospital specifically to check if they have beds available and they said they did. When we arrived here, they told us they had no beds and they cannot admit patients from outside of Ahmedabad district. What kind of rule is this?” As he was speaking, security personnel asked him to stop interacting with journalists.

On the Spot: 17th April 2021, Ahmedabad



Seven kilometers away at the Civil Hospital, at least eight ambulances stood at the hospital’s COVID-19 ward, which was located at the rear, to take bodies of the deceased to nearby crematoriums or cemeteries. Three security guards stood by the gated entrance, which was only big enough for one small ambulance. Hospital staff transferred each body into each waiting vehicle. Mourning family members stood in small groups on the street and footpath outside.

The guards called in family members in groups of five to identify the dead. “They don’t hand us the body, they are shifted directly into the ambulances,” Akhlaq Khan, a 40-year-old man whose younger brother had died of COVID at the hospital, said. “Now we will see him straight away at the cemetery but he will be wrapped up in that white plastic. We will never see his face again.” Khan told me that he had waited for four hours before he was called in to identify his brother’s body. “And god

knows what the situation will be like at the cemetery, how much longer we will have to wait.”

Ahmedabad’s efforts to handle the devastating surge of infection includes a new 900-bed dedicated COVID-19 care hospital. The Defence Research and Development Organisation had set up this facility in the record time of eight days at a convention centre in the Memnagar neighbourhood. The hospital conducted a dry run on 22 April. Yet, authorities waited for Amit Shah, the union home minister, to review preparations (<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/ahmedabad/amit-shah-to-visit-drdo-covid-facility-today-7285375/>) at the hospital on the evening of 23 April. According to the covid19india.org, the volunteer-driven COVID-19 data tracker, 22 COVID-19 patients died in Ahmedabad on that day. The DRDO hospital was supposed to start taking in patients on 24 April but remained closed.

🔗 (<https://caravanmagazine.in/health/covid19-patients-struggle-to-get-into-ahmedabad-hospitals/attachment-16986>)



People selling nanamis—stretchers to carry the dead—on the roadside in Ahmedabad.
SHAHID TANTRAY FOR THE CARAVAN

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