

## Editorial

# Vulture journalism in medical reporting – Has the Lancet become a rag newspaper?

Satish Bhat<sup>1</sup>, P. M. Parikh<sup>2</sup>, S. Badamath<sup>3</sup>, K. Narasimha Rao<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Plastic Surgery, Yenepoya Speciality Hospital, Mangalore, Karnataka, <sup>2</sup>Department of Medical Oncology, Mumbai Oncocare Centre, Mumbai, Maharashtra, <sup>3</sup>Department of Psychiatry, National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences, Bengaluru, Karnataka, <sup>4</sup>PGDMLE, Orthopaedic Surgeon and Medicolegal Consultant, Sai Care Hospital, Woraiyur, Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India.



### \*Corresponding author:

Dr. Satish Bhat,  
Department of Plastic Surgery,  
Yenepoya Speciality Hospital,  
Mangalore, Karnataka, India.

[drbhatplastic@gmail.com](mailto:drbhatplastic@gmail.com)

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Nothing sells like bad News! Mainstream media have become experts in this “art,” fine tuning their devious methods since years. The recent Editorial in the Lancet “India’s COVID-19 Emergency” takes the cake – as a landmark low in vulture journalism.<sup>[1]</sup> What was previously considered as a respected scientific medical journal has stooped to the level of tabloid newspapers such as the Sun and Daily Star.<sup>[2]</sup>

Strengthening the positive is the need of the hour, the epitome being the theme for World Health Day “Building a fairer, healthier world for everyone” (April 7, 2021). On the other hand, the editorial team of Lancet was busy digging dirt against India. While the second wave of the Chinese COVID-19 pandemic was spreading devastation across the globe, biased and politically motivated media were gleefully showcasing images of gloom and doom from only one country – India. Did they show any such images from hospitals in the USA or the UK, even at the peak of their COVID-19 onslaught? The answer is a clear No! In the US, the HIPAA Act makes it an offence to publish such details including images of death without consent.<sup>[3]</sup> For the Lancet (and other vulture journalists), whatever little ethics they have evaporates when it comes to bashing India.<sup>[1,4]</sup>

When it comes to a country with a population of 1.38 billion, absolute numbers will always be high. They can easily be used to project an inflated image of ground reality – especially for COVID-19-related morbidity and mortality. How can our incidence be compared to a tiny country, for instance Seychelles, whose population is less than 100,000. May we remind Lancet that the COVID-19 mortality in India, when seen as per million of population is only a fraction of that seen in the UK, the US, and other Western countries.<sup>[5,6]</sup> Even today, the deaths per million of population in India is less than 10% of that in the USA, the UK, Brazil, France, Spain, and Italy.<sup>[7]</sup> Why then flash absolute numbers showing India in poor light? Can it be a deliberate attempt to spread panic, chaos, and despair? Or is it to influence public sentiment and then force the country to purchase unnecessary equipment or material from the Western world at inflated prices? Irrespective of their real motive, no one can dispute that such irresponsible journalism leads to significant adverse impact on Mental Health of Indians.<sup>[8]</sup>

Even appeals by professionals fell on deaf ears – a total disregard for evidence of serious mental health hazards already being high during disaster less profound than the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>[9]</sup> Was the International Media (in the US and the UK), showing disturbing images of dead bodies burning in cremation grounds in India, to divert the

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attention of their own citizens from the dismal situation in their respective countries? Repeatedly flashing such images is cruel and inhuman. Even the burial of a terrorist like Osama Bin Laden was given more dignity (did any media show pictures of his burial?). It is common knowledge that the cremation of mortal remains by Hindus is a sacred and very personal ceremony. It is to solemnize the departure of the soul to its maker (breaking its link with the body) and is vital for emotional wellbeing and closure to the family.<sup>[10]</sup> Why then did Western media show total disregard about maintaining confidentiality and respecting such personal events? In contrast, are the low key and muted murmurs about hundreds of bodies (of those who died due to COVID-19) still awaiting burial and lying in refrigerated trucks outside New York city.<sup>[11]</sup> Have we seen any disturbing images of these?

Vulture journalists have not even shied away from posting fake and morphed images – for instance, the New York Post has published a photograph showing the body of a woman lying on the street and claimed it to be death due to COVID-19.<sup>[12]</sup> In reality, it is a photograph that was published almost a year ago following leakage of gas in Andhra Pradesh. Can journalism stoop lower!<sup>[13,14]</sup> Yes, it can. Today, they are distorting positive initiatives taken by Indian authorities, and casting aspersions on them using dubious sources.<sup>[15,16]</sup> Aren't remarks like "Nero fiddles when Rome burns" more appropriate for the previous US leadership?

Vulture journalists, like the Lancet, should be held accountable for the consequence of such fake news, concocted images, and misleading sensationalism.<sup>[17]</sup> They are solely responsible for adding to the panic, confusion, and failure of people to follow COVID-19 appropriate behavior. The fall out includes black marketing and hoarding of medical supplies, oxygen cylinders, and oxygen concentrators. The fear in the minds of patients is fuelled to such an extent that people start thronging and crowding hospital facilities for the slightest of symptoms. Is this the real agenda of the media vultures? Are they orchestrating this at the behest of vested business interests? Perhaps involving financiers of vaccine and pharma companies; people who portray themselves as running international NGOs for the benefit of LMIC but refuse to let go of the formula of the anti-COVID-19 vaccine whose intellectual property rights they own.<sup>[18]</sup>

Exploiting tragedy as just another commodity is not the exclusive purview of foreign media. Did one prominent Indian journalist jump on this bandwagon, with disregard for the memory of her own father? She claimed that her dying father's last words to her were "I'm choking, treat me."<sup>[19]</sup> We are wondering how this patient was not being treated, when he was actually admitted under

India's greatest experts at a prestigious corporate hospital considered as one of the best internationally?<sup>[20]</sup> We also ask how a patient in the ICU on ventilator support was able to speak. Did the concerned journalist enter a highly restricted area unnecessarily and put at risk the lives of other patients admitted there?<sup>[21]</sup>

The Lancet editorial has many factual errors, besides relying on dubious sources.<sup>[22]</sup> It is, therefore, not surprise that they arrived at outrageous conclusions, justifying their political agenda in the guise of social responsibility.<sup>[23]</sup> Chinese military researchers and public health officials discussed weaponization of SARS coronavirus, in a 5-year-old publication.<sup>[24]</sup> Why has Lancet not written any editorial on this subject – or the subject of crimes against humanity in China?<sup>[25]</sup> Instead, they turn a blind eye to the fate of the whistle blower doctors at the epicenter (Wuhan) of the Chinese COVID-19 outbreak, origin of the current pandemic.<sup>[26]</sup> We request the Asia editor of Lancet, Helena Hui Wang, to wake up!

The Professionalism Code of Conduct of World Association of Medical Editors (2016) states that editors of medical journals are accountable and responsible for what they publish.<sup>[27]</sup> The first priority of editors should be to preserve the reputation of their journals through their ethical behavior.<sup>[17,23]</sup> If their action will make Lancet fall into the category of a rag newspaper, what is the hidden agenda of the Lancet's editorial board?

In summary, the Chinese COVID-19 pandemic is being deliberately misused to discredit India's efforts. Such actions have a significant contribution to disrupting India's health-care system and would form sufficient grounds for prosecution under the "Epidemic Diseases Act 1897," National Disaster Management Act 2005 and various sections of IPC and IT Act.<sup>[28]</sup>

What ethical editors and publishers should do is to provide a balanced critical reporting based on facts with the intention to be proactive and facilitate solutions. The selfless dedication of health-care professionals, voluntary agencies (religious or otherwise), other frontline workers, and the administration (state and central) needs to be appreciated and lauded appropriately. India's Vaccine Maitri (Friendship) project, undertaken by our government, has provided 66 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to 95 countries – either free or at minimal cost.<sup>[29]</sup> Did the Lancet bother to take note of this generous humanitarian initiative for social good? Or did it highlight the fact that western nations having stockpiles of unused vaccines were only providing excuses and lip service when it came to sharing with the developing countries? As health professionals our job should be to desist from fear mongering, not make misleading statements, and ensure we use robust "level one" facts on which to base our

conclusions. The current Lancet editorial team (and other vulture journalists) should be aware that all of us have to ultimately answer to a higher being. Can you face your day of judgment with a clear conscience?

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