

OnMyMind

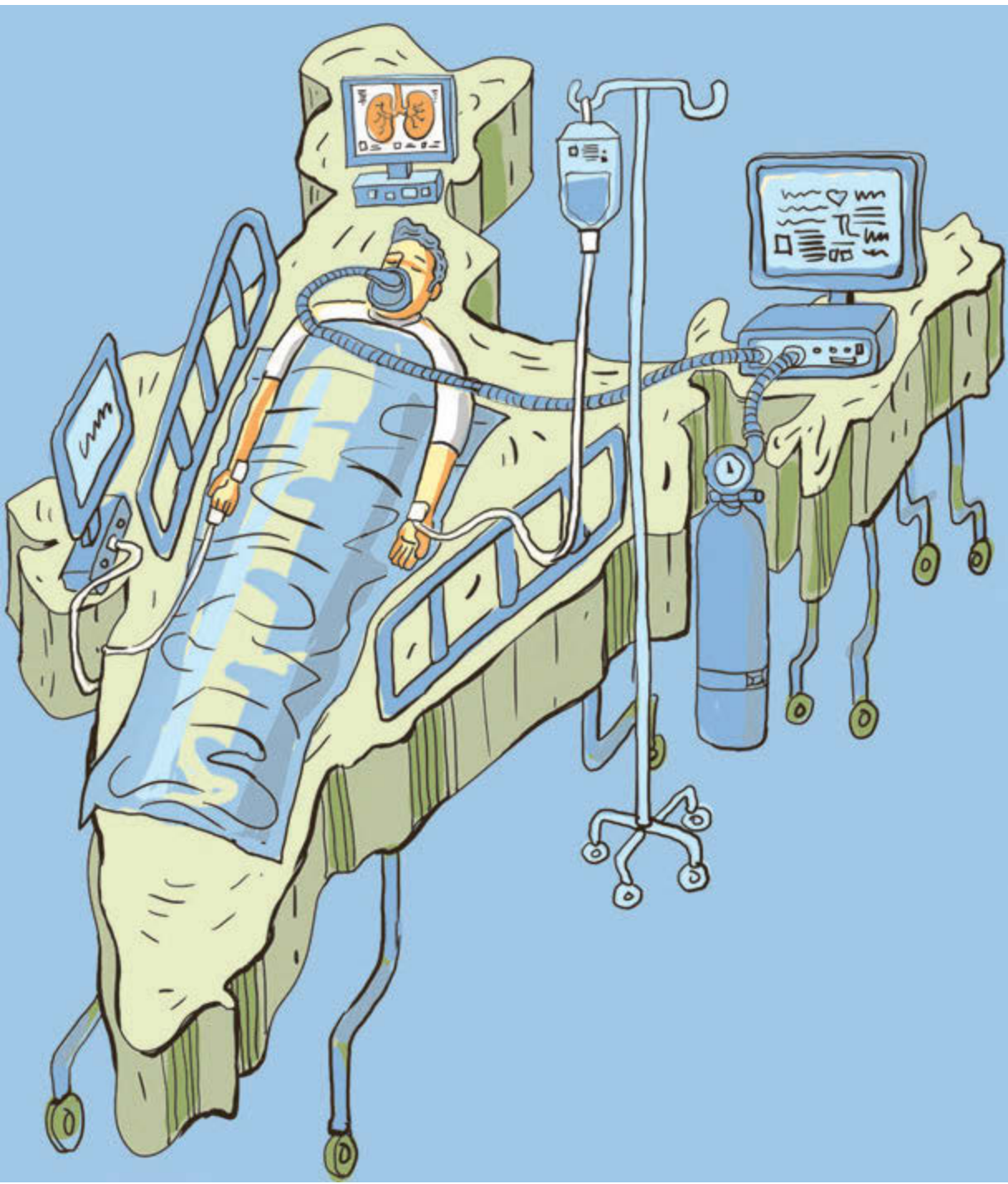
In India, fear and compassion

Even as Covid 19 spawns a never-ending refrain of despair, the humanity of strangers is comforting



Rohit Brijnath

Fear rustles within my friend like something unknown in the bushes. It's an April weekend and he clips the oximeter to his finger and checks his oxygen saturation. It's 98, it's fine, breathe. Ten minutes later he checks again. It's still 98, stay calm. My friend is intelligent and rational but isolating in his room in Delhi, his agitation is leading him briefly to the periphery of panic. Again the oximeter. Then again. He's OK but will he be OK in 10 minutes? My friend, V, who lives in Delhi, has Covid-19. Fear is any reading under 94 because then he's been advised to go to a hospital and no one wants to go to a hospital in Delhi. "People tell you horror stories," says V, and he's a journalist and he's seen things in 55 years but foreboding nestles in the stories of dwindling oxygen supplies, the accelerating numbers, the unavailable beds, the haunting images of ambulances lined up outside hospital gates. In his first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, John Cheever wrote that "fear tastes like a rusty knife and do not let her into your house", but it's too late. You can lock the gate and bar the windows, but the tendrils of fear slip under the door and through the mesh and sit in your room. This is India now. From mid-October last year, for 71 days, I came here to the town of Dehra Dun in the north of India to help care for my mother who had a stroke. I returned here this year on April 2 and it feels like two countries. One apprehensive last autumn, the other scared this spring. In Delhi, overrun by Covid-19, a friend, J, tells me his fear lies simply in the anticipation. "Is it coming for me?" Fear goes to bed with you and it is there when you awake and it's exhausting for people. Fear is in the words people use, in the WhatsApp posts, in the Washington Post story where they write that "the surge in India is not a wave but a wall: The spike is so steep that the increase looks almost vertical". It is disorienting



ST ILLUSTRATION: CEL GULAPA

really to be at the epicentre of a disaster story. "Catastrophic", says a cousin and in India now there is no such thing as exaggeration. In a usually overstated world, almost anything you hear is understated. Reporters here – like the fine ones from the India Bureau of this newspaper – are doing a valiant job recounting the crisis, but the depth of the grief seems beyond any retelling. No conversation is free from Covid-19 and there is no interaction it doesn't drip into. "Did you know?" people start and you wonder, "Do I want to know?" But the truth can't be hidden nor must it be. Queues at crematoriums, a shortage of vaccines, political dithering, a backlog of tests. It is like some never-ending refrain of despair. In December, when I left India, test results came back in a day. Now another friend, S, has a test on a Saturday and the lab technician

tells her in Hindi: "Madam, chaar din. Pehle aa gaya toh aapki kismet (four days Madam, if you get it before then it's your good luck)." He's right, it takes four days, and S is positive. She lives with her 85-year-old mum in Delhi and now fear has arrived in another house. Once, last year, we might have known someone who knew someone who had Covid-19. Now our friends have it and we're also becoming familiar with the dead. My mother's old pal calls from another town and I eavesdrop as they talk on speakerphone. "Remember Cynthia," she says. "She's gone. Covid." These chatting women, 88 and 76, have the weathered faces of long-distance travellers through life and yet they are shaken. "I got nothing to say," the friend says, her voice tired and empty. "Never thought I would live through a time like this." My mother listens. Words seemed redundant.

To scroll through Twitter is to encounter a landscape of loss. People are asking for help, networking, pleading. Here, in a few urgent lines, heartbreak meets helplessness. "Desperately looking for an ICU bed for my father. He is COVID +ve. Short of breath. Has diabetes and kidneys affected. Oxygen saturation - 78-80." "I'm writing this in absolute desperation of support. My father has been found Covid positive. He's in critical condition and 70% of lungs got damaged. With each passing day, it is becoming impossible to keep up with the high charges of the hospital." "I am right now cremating one of my family members at Brighat Garh and meanwhile trying to arrange Oxygen Concentrator for other family members who are all Corona Positive at Noida Sector 93. I am all broken and nothing is helping. Please help me, I am

begging you please!" Last October in India, I still went out – to banks, occasional shops, a lunch party, while my friends drove down from Delhi to spend weekends with me. Now I haven't been out for 10 days except to the end of my lane on Thursday as two policemen on a motorcycle let go short blasts of a siren to signal the closing of shops at 2pm. The bakery is shut, the mechanic has locked his door, the electrical shop owner has rolled down his shutters. Later at 7pm, a curfew will commence until 5am. In the afternoon, only Umesh, who has sold vegetables from a cart near my house for roughly 20 years, stands there. He has the shrug of people who have no choice. Poverty brings vulnerability and privilege is still an armour, even if a dented one. PPEs and shields are stored in my home just in case and visitors are restricted, but Covid-19, sly and mean, is known to slip through the cracks between caution and vigilance. Two nurses come to my house daily and they bring care and expertise to my mother but also the outside world. Safety is an imperfect calculation. Singapore feels like another planet, a steadier shore, and if from there the world seemed safe, from here it's only dangerous. Everything in life is about the prism you look through. Still, I feel luckier than expatriate Indians in Singapore who live far from their families. Distance is cruel anyway but now it must amplify their fear. India lurches, blames, hopes, fumes, flees to the villages, breathes, loves but it is also dying. In a land divided by so much, fear is the connective tissue. Sometimes the fear ebbs and then the day's infection figure – 300,000-plus cases – is announced and it returns like an insistent tide. Yet, amid all this, small puffs of hope rise from the earth like the Indian dust. So much has failed but not the compassion of strangers. People are listing their phone numbers on Twitter and volunteering to cook meals and deliver them to Covid-19 patients. They are ready to buy groceries, deliver medicines or even hold pro bono counselling sessions. V, my friend with Covid-19, tells me of a patient requiring plasma and a gentleman in his office, who had recovered from the virus, standing up and saying "I want to give" and then driving to the hospital to donate blood. "The ordinary man as hero," says V and these simple acts by anonymous people are somehow comforting. They speak of resilience and initiative and empathy, so many of the qualities we require in any crisis. In a terrible time, they offer us a humanity to clutch onto. It makes us feel just a little less afraid.

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MillennialMind

Filial piety norms: Caught between two worlds

I will support and care for my parents. But I don't expect my future children to do so to the same extent for me. Expectations of filial piety norms are shifting across generations, and that's a good thing.



Yuen Sin

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Giving your parents a monthly allowance, living with them at least till you get married, and taking care of them if they are ill instead of relying on institutional help are actions that are commonly viewed as displays of filial piety in Singapore. "How one generation loves, the next generation learns," went the tagline of a commercial supported by the then Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports a decade ago, which aimed to promote the concept of filial piety. But what if each generation has a different way of showing what this

love could look like? As I edge closer to my 30s and the prospect of starting my own family in the next few years, what I expect from my own children will shift in tandem with the evolution of our population and policy landscape. Like eight in 10 of Singaporeans here, I give a sum of money to my parents on a regular basis to help them to defray their expenses. I feel that this is the right thing to do, because I do not pay rent when I live with them, and also because my parents, who are Merdeka Generation seniors, have lived frugally their whole lives to ensure that my needs, and those of my older brother, are taken care of. While they have set aside some funds for retirement, some additional cash will help them to enjoy little luxuries in life that they may be reluctant to shell out for – taking a taxi instead of public transport, or going on holidays abroad. But my own expectations for my future children, if I have any, are different. I am better educated and have access to a lot more skills and career opportunities than my parents had, and I plan to be less reliant on my own children for financial support when I grow old. Lifespans are also getting longer, and it would not be realistic to

expect my children to support my retirement needs, while at the same time planning for their own. In 1990, for instance, the life expectancy at birth for women was 77 – that figure has since gone up to 85 in 2019. Future generations may also have to contend with more uncertainties and challenges in the job market as the pace of disruption accelerates. As acclaimed economist Minouche Shafik told my colleague in an interview recently, workers of the future may carry more risk as work becomes more flexible. There are also threats on the external front, such as climate change, which will hit younger generations harder, she added. The last thing I want to do is to add to their struggles by depending on them to support my old age. It is likely that more Singaporeans will feel this way. According to the National Survey of Senior Citizens, income transfer from children was diminishing as the most important source of financial support for the elderly. In 2005, 79 per cent of those aged 65 to 74 said it was the most important source, compared to 45 per cent in 2011 – the latest year for which survey results are available. Meanwhile, 74 per cent of HDB residents aged 55 and above received regular financial support from their children in 2018, down from 79 per cent in 2008, according to the HDB Sample Household Survey 2018. The same survey showed a slight generational shift in views on whether it is the duty of children to take care of their parents, even if

this is at the expense of their own well-being. Six per cent of HDB residents aged 55 and above with married children disagreed with this statement, compared to 9 per cent of married residents aged 54 and below. Experts have said that such shifts in attitudes could be due to factors such as smaller family sizes, more support from the Government when it comes to retirement financing, and a growing belief in self-reliance among the younger generations. Personally, I hope to work for as long as I can to avoid having to depend on others. Work helps give a sense of purpose and meaning, builds up retirement savings, and contributes to society.

CARE FOR ELDERS

Another norm that may change is living options for the elderly. Some may think it unfilial to place their parents into residential care settings such as nursing homes, and not look after their needs at home. But perhaps this view is coloured by the way many of today's institutionalised nursing homes are set up – rows of beds, dormitory-style, with regimented timing for meals, baths and activities, and the occasional complaints of neglect or even abuse. In recent years, groups such as the Lien Foundation and the Assisted Living Facilities Association have been advocating for better models of care for seniors. This is timely, as nearly one in three people in Singapore is forecast to need eldercare services

by 2030. More housing models for seniors have been rolled out. The integrated Housing Board development, Kampung Admiralty, offers home medical and nursing care within residential blocks. Harmony Village @ Bukit Batok, which is the first assisted living project in public housing, will offer care, support and communal activities for the seniors, with its completion expected in 2024. While many people relish family life and would prefer to age with loved ones at home, it may be unrealistic to expect family members to provide full-time care at home for their elderly who are frail and sick, as they have their own children, work and lives to juggle. Caregiving is a demanding task that can lead to burnout – an issue that has received some attention in recent years. Living in an assisted living facility, surrounded by peers, professional help and a sense of community, could be a viable alternative or complement to relying on family members for care needs. The HDB survey also found that more than four in 10 elderly HDB residents are willing to stay in assisted-living facilities if there is a need, so they can have access to professional medical and nursing care. Associate Professor Angelique Chan, executive director of the Duke-NUS Medical School's Centre for Ageing Research and Education, noted in a commentary on aged care in Asian societies on The Conversation website in October last year that filial piety

had historically played an important role when families were large, pension schemes were unavailable and life expectancy was around 50 years. But with changing demographics, it has become increasingly untenable for family to become the primary support system for the elderly. Instead, the provision of integrated care in partnership with individuals, their carers and family, is the way forward, she said. As a millennial with elderly parents who is now thinking about having a family, I find myself caught between two worlds. As a child, I hope to do my best to honour what my parents would expect of me when it comes to caring for them as they age. But I do not expect my future children to do likewise. In my view, adapting to such changing expectations does not mean that one generation is less filial. Rather, having each generation plan for itself better to avoid over-burdening the future generation, will make it more sustainable for families to attain a better quality of life, and still maintain strong bonds across generations.

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MILLENNIAL MIND

The Sunday Times newsroom's millennials – those born in the 1980s and 1990s – tackle issues close to their hearts in this new column.