

The Last Shift

When the Taliban Came to the Medical Center

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On the afternoon of 15 August 2021, Dr. Kareem, an Afghan physician scurried to his Emergency Room shift at the largest medical center in Kabul. A familiar acrid waft coalesced with the scent of manure, burning trash, and pollution as he walked past the Afghan Army guards outside the hospital; however, today in particular he noticed that there seemed to be an ever more present sense of doom. It undoubtedly reflected the recent Taliban successes on the battlefield across the country yet today that anxiety had evolved into a panic. In the last few days, Taliban skirmishes on the edges of the capital had quickly morphed into unchallenged forays. Shuffling with his slip-on sandals from his office to the ER, his shift typically would start at 1600 and go until 2300, but today he had been called in early at 1300; there must be more casualties from the fighting he thought.

As he entered into the main hospital compound, his eyes gazed upward to the whooshing of multiple Chinook helicopters racing from the US Embassy in the direction of the airport. It appeared chaotic and unplanned, with a smoke rising from the distance; the scene appeared foreboding. Mesmerized by the aerial activity, Dr. Kareem almost tripped over a pile of clothes as he kept walking. Stunned, he looked down to see discarded military and hospital uniforms, people were abandoning their posts and changing into local attire to blend into the local population.

Suddenly, he felt a knot tighten deep in his stomach as he wondered what he should do. He would get these irritable bowel symptoms during periods of high stress ever since he was a child but this episode seemed more painful. His pace slowed as he took deep breaths in and out, closing his eyes to center himself. Two years ago, he unexpectedly learned that his brother had been murdered by the Taliban from a gloating tweet from their spokesman; a grimace crept over his face as he was reminded of his duty. Whether on the front-lines of his country during the COVID 19 pandemic or managing the endless stream of traumas and medical emergencies since becoming an attending, Dr. Kareem put service before self. He picked up his pace and walked into the ER; relieved to see some of his physician colleagues who were similarly drawn to a sense of personal duty and responsibility.

He checked on the nurses and attendants who remained at their posts, but his concerns and queries had already been posed by his other physician friends: what was going to happen? He had admitted a 60-year stroke patient to the floor the previous day and so he and his physician friends went up to the 7th floor and rounded on her, meeting some other hospitalists and specialists. He stopped at the balcony of the hospital where he saw a view of the Afghan Presidential palace and the US Embassy. Afghan military and US military helicopters flew non-stop to the airport; everyone was leaving. He spit outside the window, shook his head, and turned towards a hospitalist, "thieves," he remarked as he pointed to the Afghan presidential palace. The group of physicians rounded on a few patients together before heading back down the ED where Dr. Kareem nervously tapped out WhatsApp messages to friends and family. The hospital leadership came down to the ER also wondering what to do? Rumors swirled that the US military had seized the international airport and they also heard that President Ghani had fled the country; the government had collapsed. More hospital workers left the ER and Dr. Kareem sat at a workstation allowing his mind to wander nervously as he imagined what the future would hold.

At 2300, a call came from the front gate of the hospital to the ER, "the Taliban are here," announced Dr. Kareem's charge nurse. A silent despair crept up Dr. Kareem's body and his neck felt hot, he tried to

center himself again but this time however his mind raced inconsolably. He felt like crying but he did not want to show any emotion in front of his colleagues. Dr. Kareem idled by the front of the ER looking into the distance as he saw the fluttering Afghan National Flag that flew at the beginning of his shift brought down, and replaced by the white standard of the Taliban. Three Toyota pick-up trucks pulled into the driveway and 20 heavily armed Taliban soldiers, jumped out of the vehicles. Some looked like children between the ages of 15-20, but clearly battle hardened and angry appearing. Accompanying them was an older male with a black turban, who seemed to be in charge and approached the chief hospital administrator and requested that all guards in the hospital hand over their weapons.

All the physicians in the trauma center along with the hospital administrators made a semi-circle in the main ED area as the elder Taliban leader introduced himself as Mawlai Naseem, the Taliban deputy health commissioner. The physicians then introduced themselves and their specialties. Dr. Kareem eyes glazed over as Mr. Naseem praised the physicians for serving their people and called on them to return to their daily tasks. He reassured them that salaries would be continued to be paid and stated that another delegation would come in the morning. With that the Taliban left in the same ostentatious manner that they arrived; it was clear who was in charge. Dr. Kareem went back to his work-station and stared at the computer blankly, as the hours ticked away he messaged his American friend, an Emergency Medicine resident at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, "Do you know anyone at the Airport?"

Despite extensive efforts from contacts he had in the US military, Dr. Kareem would not be able to get out of Afghanistan. He took his family to the airport and lived the scenes of chaos, terror and hopelessness but as a father; it simply became more dangerous each day. He finally did get inside the airport only to be turned away after being told that his documentation was not sufficient. Following the tragic suicide bombing at the airport on 25AUG2021, Dr. Kareem made the decision to stay put.

He watched from his window holding the hand of his daughter as smoke billowed from the airport, peering at his city, wondering what would come next. The smell of the air still smelt acrid, except this time, there was a scent of flesh.

Dr. Kareem (not his real name) is still in Afghanistan and after more than 3 years of shuttling between different physician jobs and struggling to feed his family, he has returned back to the old medical center that he used to work in Kabul; now under the control of the Taliban. He has applied for Visas both to India and the United States but has yet to hear back. This article was written as a compilation of interviews between Dr. Kareem and Dr. Shukla to tell his story to the world.