



## ‘Where are all the patients?’

Doctor-writer Sandeep Jauhar, who was at the WTC within hours of the attack, recalls the horror. **George Joseph** reports



Sandeep Jauhar

On Tuesday (*September 11, 2001*), our triage center — the main medical unit at the disaster site — was set up in the lobby of a building on West Broadway. Twenty or so doctors staffed the different departments: Trauma, burns and injuries, wounds and fractures. I was in asthma and chest pain. We treated a few firefighters suffering from smoke inhalation, giving them oxygen to breathe and a drug to help open their airways.

On my way downtown with a caravan of doctors from Bellevue, I had braced myself to confront throngs of seriously injured people, comforted by the thought that at least I would have plenty of backup.

But now there was no one around except my fellow physicians. ‘Where are all the patients?’ I asked thinking they might be in a treatment room somewhere nearby.

‘They’re all dead,’ a fellow doctor told me.

The streets were deserted. The sickening stench of burned plastic permeated the air. Bombed-out cars, coated with an inch of cement dust and ash, lined the muddy streets. The ground was strewn with paper and abandoned shoes, as if people had literally vanished in their tracks.

About an hour later, we got word that a building half a block away was on fire and could collapse. A firefighter told me it would be too dangerous to try to douse the flames. ‘We’re going to let it burn.’

But we would have to move. We loaded our supplies on plastic stretchers and hoisted our oxygen tanks and set off for the student union at Pace University two blocks away. There, we sat for a while in the smoky gloom as evening fell, trading stories and waiting for someone to treat.

A senior cardiologist in my department, an Israeli, gazed at the destruction. ‘I thought I had seen everything,’ he said softly.

The day after the attack, the smoke and stench of burning plastic was even stronger.

I entered the morgue set up at the clothing store reluctantly. Cadavers had always made me feel queasy in medical school. In anatomy lab, I had mostly watched as others dissected. In the near corner was a small group of doctors and nurses, and next to them was an empty plastic stretcher.

Behind the group was a wooden table where a nurse and two medical students were sitting grim-faced, looking like some sort of a macabre tribunal.

In the far corner, next to what looked like a blown-out door, was a pile of orange body bags, about 20 of them. Soldiers were standing guard. In the store’s dressing room were stacks of unused body bags.

I was probably the most experienced doctor in the room, a thought that deeply disturbed me. I had just finished my internal medicine residency in June.

At this point some National Guardsmen brought in a body bag and laid it on the stretcher. The female doctor unzipped it and inspected the contents. ‘Holy mother of God,’ she said, and turned away. In the bag was a left leg and part of a pelvis... A policeman said that part of the victim’s body had been brought in earlier, along with a cell phone.

I was in a fog. I felt totally unequipped to do this kind of work. I recalled my friends who had done medical clerkships in Africa. They had told me of the terrible tragedies and the deep frustration of not having proper medical supplies. But we were not suffering from a lack of supplies. This was not Third World medicine. It was netherworld medicine, without rules.

Another body bag came in. I was in charge, but I wasn’t a pathologist. I was just improvising. After sifting through the bag’s contents, I began to feel ill. I walked past some headless mannequins and out into the smoke-filled air.

That tragic day took away our sense of security, especially for those of us living in New York.

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## Nothing gained, much lost

Peace activists share their 9/11 nightmares with **George Joseph**

### On that 9/11 birthday

Peace activist Shreekumar Poddar, leader of the Vaishnava Center, Michigan, and NRIs for Secular and Harmonious India, was looking forward to celebrating his birthday.

‘A friend asked me on September 10, 2001, ‘What will you do on your birthday tomorrow?’

I replied, ‘I will be working very hard for peace in the world.’”

Little did he know how prophetic his words would turn out to be:

We remained glued to the television to try to make sense of this senseless tragedy. The whole country was in a state of mourning. We in our small Midwestern community launched a campaign to give succor to the family members of the victims of the 9/11 attack.

We purchased ads in the newspaper, made mailings and raised money. Local volunteer groups in New York City opened counseling programs to help family members, especially children.

An American school teacher who was married to the Bangladeshi manager of the Windows on the World restaurant at the WTC asked for our help to deal with her eight-year-old son’s grief. The boy refused to go to school. He was very angry.

We were fortunate to find an Indian social worker near her home who was a tremendous help over the next several months.

After the tragedy the entire world had to tighten security. In Lansing, Michigan, where I live, you could not go to the airport terminal to drop people or pick them up. The airline electric carts picked you up in the parking lot and dropped you at the terminal.

I am not sure that anything was gained by 9/11. But much was lost. Soon the United States attacked Iraq despite the fact that none of the hijackers were from that country.

Congress passed the Patriots Act, which is still in force. Many of its provisions violate the constitutional guarantees. This 2,000-plus page bill was passed in 24 hours without giving our elected representatives time to even read it. America is fast becoming a police state.

America lost much of its civil freedoms.

### It will take decades to recover

Dr Pritam K Rohila, executive director, Association for Communal Harmony in Asia, which works for peace between India and Pakistan, first heard about the attack on radio.

I rushed downstairs and turned the television on and was glued to the TV for hours.

I was dumbstruck. It was hard to believe that something like that could happen in the United States, and that a few people from the Middle East could carry it out.

For a few days, moving around town, I was self-conscious of my skin color and wondered if people would associate me with those who planned and carried out the attacks.

Repercussions of the new US foreign policy destabilized not only Afghanistan and Iraq, but also the neighboring countries, most particularly Pakistan.

It will take decades for the US, and probably longer for the other affected nations to recover from the aftereffects of post-9/11 US policies.

I believe that arrogant and short-sighted policy of successive US governments, and their support of dictatorial regimes around the world, who abused their people, eventually contributed to development and deepening of hate against the US.

September 11, 2001 represented the culmination of this sentiment for many people.