India is struggling to catch up with the spread of COVID-19

A patient and doctor in a mobile medical centre in India.
[Photo: Trinity Care Foundation]

There are so many cases that hospitals cannot cope.

COVID-19 has been going out of control in some parts of India, causing terrible suffering.

One mother with breathing problems was brought to a hospital in East Delhi. However, the hospital was full so she had to wait on a stretcher outside. "Her husband and daughter pleaded with the guards to allow her to be taken to the emergency ward so she could be given oxygen," reported the Indian Express.

The 44-year-old woman was wheeled in only an hour later. It was too late. She died soon after.

Such scenes were repeated thousands and thousands of times over the past few weeks. In early May, the country had more new cases of the disease than the rest of the world combined. On some days, there were so many people dying that they could not be given proper funerals.

Why it got so bad

Most patients who catch COVID-19 can stay at home and take ordinary medicines. Those who are very sick or weak need to be treated in hospital.

The coronavirus that causes COVID-19 attacks the lungs. Our lungs do amazing work: when we breathe, they draw oxygen from the air and absorb it into our blood.

Oxygen is needed to fuel all the work our bodies do, like the thinking in our brains and beating of our hearts.

Air contains 21 percent oxygen but this may not be enough when patients have a **respiratory** illness like COVID-19, making them struggle to breathe. Doctors can then give patients extra oxygen from a tank to make it easier for the lungs to do their work.

With this oxygen plus special medicines, even patients with bad **symptoms** can recover.

So, doctors and nurses know how to handle COVID-19 cases. Only around 2 percent die from the disease. However, because the virus spreads so easily, the disease can spin out of control, **overwhelming** hospitals. If there are too many cases at the same time, there will not be enough hospital beds, doctors, nurses, medicines and oxygen for all of them. This is what happened in India.

Experts say the government made a big mistake after the country got over the first wave of the epidemic last year. It relaxed rules and allowed big crowds to gather for religious and political events. It also did not prepare enough beds and supplies in case of a second wave. The country, with help from other governments, is desperately trying to control the disease. Until that happens, things will be very difficult.

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VOCAB BUILDER

overwhelming (say "oh-ver-**well**- ming"; adjective) = too powerful to handle.

respiratory (say "res-pi-**ray**-tree"; adjective) = to do with breathing.

symptoms (say "**sim**-tums"; noun) = the signs of an illness.