

E-Coli

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Illustration by Manender Singh

“BRING the defibrillator, quick! We can’t lose him!” Dr. Sharma screamed to his staff while thumping his fists on the patient’s chest. The nurse hurriedly actuated the machine and aligned it to the cot.

“On my count -- 3, 2, 1”, and he pressed the pistons on the patient’s chest.

The body jerked and fell limp. He tried again and anxiously stared at the cardiogram. No pulse. He pressed it the third time but to no avail.

Wretched and appalled at his own helplessness, he pulled the sheet over the dead man’s face.

It was lunch time. Dr. Sharma walked into his chamber with a hefty gait. His sombre eyes were pouring with agony and helplessness.

He picked up the receiver but instead of calling for the lunch box, he rang on the intercom to call a meeting with all the doctors in his department. Within a few minutes the medicos assembled in his chamber.

“Sorry for ravaging your lunch hour, but we are in a grave fix folks,” said Dr Sharma. “We lost Mr. Singh too. The irony is that, as of now, we do not know what we are dealing with. I, with more than two blessed decades of medical experience, have never seen such a stupefying situation where I feel so stranded. Medical reports are as ordinary as it can be by any standard definition.” He paused to glance at the papers in his hand.

Seemingly reading from it he said, “A person on the brink of perfect health, suddenly sickens and collapses. Best known cause: multi-organ failure due to uncontrolled cellular autophagy triggered by extremely mysterious factors. Back to back five fatalities.

It is also not good for the prestige of this hospital.”

Then turning to Dr. Jasbir he asked, “What does the blood test of the Fifth Case say?”

Dr. Jasbir replied timidly, “Same as the other cases, cell counts and serum analysis within normal limits. Moreover, no unusual pathogen was detected.”

Sam, another doctor, nodded in affirmation, “Yes Sir, I checked the liver and kidney tissues and found nothing but the ruptured cells and drained mass of protoplast.”

With an expression of discontent Dr. Sharma asked the pathology intern Nadia, “What is your reporting?”

“Sir, I found little high levels of cytokinins and histamine. Looks quite similar to an allergic reaction to me,” Nadia said.

“It implies that these deaths were actually not natural but murders! But we did not find any such nanobot in the cadavers. And why would they be murdered in the first place?” Dr. Sharma grew more skeptical.

But the very next moment, someone knocked at his door, “May I come in?” Not being able to recognize by the voice he hesitatingly affirmed his permission.

A short heighted man entered with a folder in his hand. Receding hairline and a belly blob revealed his aging persona. Walking briskly only to stop right across the table, he threw his hand towards him, “Hello Dr. Sharma, I am Rohan. We had a talk over the phone yesterday. Thank you for this appointment.”

Showing the chair to the guest Dr. Sharma pondered when had he make such a talk.

“I work as a freelance journalist and derive enough to buy myself bread and beer,” he smattered with a wide grin.

“How can I help you?” Dr. Sharma impelled expressing his disinterest, or rather disgust.

Rohan spoke in a sulky voice, “As you might have guessed, or if not, then I am here to talk about the recent mortalities at your hospital.”

Dr. Sharma interrupted, “Sorry Mister, as a senior doctor here, I cannot disclose classified information to you. I have already said on TV and newspapers, what all I had to say regarding the cases. So it would be kind if you excuse me now.”

Rohan changed his tune, “Five high profile personalities have died in the last nine days in this hospital, including

today’s case,” he paused and grinned again. Looking at Dr. Sharma’s puzzled look, he continued, “And everyone out there knows that the cause is still unknown. Social media is calling it a ‘Richi Rich Syndrome’. People are afraid. Truth needs to be told to them.”

“So what do you want from me,” Dr. Sharma said trying to cut short the conversation.

“See doc! I am not here to interview you or ask you anything about your work. More importantly, I am here to tell you something, as important as it can be to you in these cases.” He leaned towards the table.

“And what is that?” Dr. Sharma asked abruptly.

“While I was skimming through old journals in the Central library, I found a research paper about nanobots that could revolutionize modern medicine.” He halted for a moment then continued, “Off late, I felt a surreal linkage between that paper and the Richi Rich Syndrome.”

Dr. Sharma looked disappointingly at his watch.

Rohan kept speaking, “...and so I went back and got a copy of that article. I contacted the journal and enquired about the authors.”

Dr. Sharma interrupted, “Will you please fast forward to why you came here? I have no interest in listening to your chivalrous saga of procuring an article.”

Unperturbed by the nudge, Rohan explained, “The paper was about a nano-robot called ‘electronic collinear module operator’ which the authors abridged as ‘E-Coli’.” He pulled out some papers from his folder and laid it in front of Dr. Sharma.

Dr. Sharma interjected satirically, “Fancy bacterial name for a robot!”

Rohan continued, “Indeed doc, the potential of this invention was enormous. Localised drug delivery, removing plaques from blocked arteries, internal bleeding repairs, so on and

“Perhaps, it could be allergic anaphylaxis. But strangely, it never causes such massive cell lysis. Anyway, scrutinize their medical histories again. What did mineral analysis tell?” Dr. Sharma inquired from the intern Sasha, who looked at her notebook and said, “Mineral levels were at par with normal except a strange presence of gold and silicon, but not to the extent of causing any disease. However, their levels were almost same in all the subjects. I have prepared a summary report of analysis and e-mailed it to you.”

“This may throw some light, I hope. Let’s get back to work and put in our best,” pressed Dr. Sharma as he glided towards his chamber.

Dr. Sharma finished his notes and pushed the diary back into the table drawer. He stretched back on his office chair to steal a rest from the workload.

Dr. Goyal resumed in his hoarse voice, “The e-coli were made as capsules for drug delivery. So like gelatin capsules, they dissolve after finishing their job. After all, they were only a bunch of gold and silicon molecules.”

so forth. However, the one that glued my eyes was a cell mediated immune response. The e-coli can stimulate each body cell to deploy their lysosomes for fighting pathogenic substances before the infection starts, thus, providing another immunity shield to the body besides blood, etc.”

As he turned the pages with seaming interest, Dr. Sharma asked skeptically, “So how does that research connect to the present situation?”

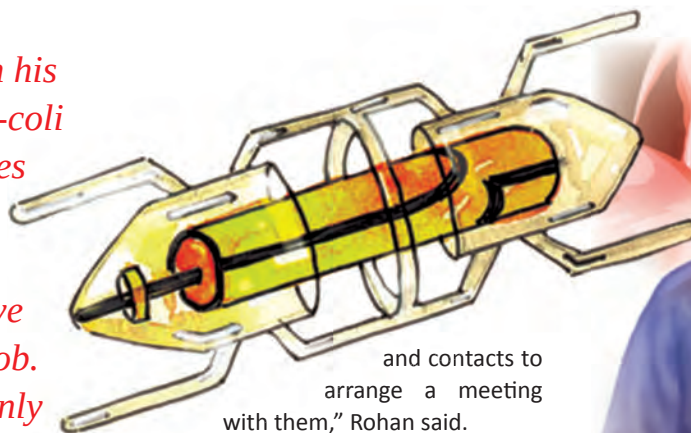
Rohan replied, “In my opinion, if e-coli can initiate such extracellular lysosome action, it can also stimulate hyper lysosome activity internally.”

“Causing cell lysis!” interrupted Dr. Sharma with increasing curiosity.

“Exactly! After all, these are only robots and can be programmed to do any job,” Rohan suggested.

“It implies that these deaths were actually not natural but murders! But we did not find any such nanobot in the cadavers. And why would they be murdered in the first place?” Dr. Sharma grew more skeptic.

“Don’t forget doc, wealth attracts enemies, like magnets attract iron filings. Moreover, I think a tete-a-tete with this paper’s authors will be more enlightening. All I came to know is that their funding was pulled out due to the security breach following which the lab was shut down and they retired to greener pastures. But I have found their address. Now you can use your position



and contacts to arrange a meeting with them,” Rohan said.

“Mr. Rohan, your imagination is commendable. But I cannot invest my precious time and energy in hunting for old scientists and invading their peace of minds due to a flimsy hypothesis of yours,” an irked Dr. Sharma said.

Appalled by Dr. Sharma’s reluctance, Rohan stubbornly pursued, “Very well doc! So how do you explain that someone perfectly fine an hour ago, suddenly feels bad and rushes to the hospital where, despite the boasted state-of-art medical care, you all cannot keep him alive? Death happened within 2-3 hours? Think about peace of minds of those scared and helpless millions. They look up to you for a reason and cure.”

Sensing the gravity in Rohan’s words, Dr. Sharma consented to meet the old scientists.

At the home of Dr. Goyal, the second author of the paper, in a small room were sitting Dr. Sharma, Mr. Rohan and Dr. Goyal himself. He was a frail old man wearing a formal tuxedo listening patiently to the other two.

“Oh! My nightmare has come true. It must be Sumit. I realised the menace we developed long back so we abandoned the research and destroyed the remaining stock,” exclaimed Dr. Goyal when Rohan and Dr. Sharma explained him the hypothesis.

“Remaining stock! You mean not the entire stock?” exclaimed Rohan.

“And who is Sumit?” Dr. Sharma asked simultaneously.



Dr. Goyal continued, “Apparently, six out of twenty batches of e-coli were stolen during a security glitch which eventually led to the closure of our lab. Sumit was my assistant in the lab. Only I know that he took away those stocks. But he was a poor chap who lost his job, so out of pity I never revealed this to anyone.”

“Is it possible to programme e-coli for autolysis?” Dr. Sharma asked impatiently.

“Indeed, you know, we wished to come up with a panacea for all the communicable pathogenic diseases. Our invention was revolutionary. It could have been a huge leap to the future of mankind. But then, there is always a flip side...” sighed Dr. Goyal.

“But we did not find them in the dead. How is that possible?” asked curious Dr. Sharma.

Dr. Goyal resumed in his hoarse voice, "The e-coli were made as capsules for drug delivery. So like gelatin capsules, they dissolve after finishing their job. After all, they were only a bunch of gold and silicon molecules."

"Yes, this explains the extra gold and silicon in the subject's blood," exclaimed Dr. Sharma.

"So I was right!" chuckled Rohan expecting a word of appreciation.

"Where do we find Sumit now?" asked Dr. Sharma paying no heed to him.

"He used to live towards the east city suburbs with an ailing mother at that time. I don't know if he still resides there," said Dr. Goyal.

Rohan exclaimed, "East city suburb! Oh Lord!"

"What is it?" Dr. Sharma asked.

"I see a link now. Besides being ravishingly rich, all the five deceased have a commonality. They dodged the law and bought property in the east city suburb to build a commercial complex. The residents were agitated for they would be expelled from their houses. However, the local media did not publish this news under their intimidating influence of the rich. So Sumit might be one of the unhappy residents."

Then he turned to Dr. Goyal and asked, "Is there any cure for this e-coli infection?"

"It's controlled by computer programme via electromagnetic waves. And suspecting its misuse, I developed a virus to block it. Wait I'll give it to you. Upload it in the control computer and all e-coli near the system will degenerate," said Dr. Goyal as he walked to another room.

Rohan turned to Dr. Sharma, "If this is true, I know exactly who will be his next target. It would be Mr. Bansal, the wall-street giant. He is the only property holder alive now. We should rush with the programme immediately." And Dr. Sharma nodded in agreement.

They left, paying a brief visit to the city police station.

At Sumit's home, he was busy typing furiously on his laptop when he heard a door knock. As he opened the door, seeing Dr. Sharma and Rohan he tried to slam it shut on their face. But Rohan pushed through with all his might, tumbling Sumit to the floor. Dr. Sharma and he darted into the house.

Sumit said with an odd smile, "I know you. You are Dr. Sharma. I saw you on TV. Good that you've come here. Now you'll tell my story to the world."

"Why are you doing this Sumit?" asserted Dr. Sharma while Rohan scanned the room.

Sumit muttered dusting his clothes, "Quid pro quo doctor."

Dr. Sharma asked, "What do you mean?"

"They destroyed my life so I destroy theirs." Sumit sat on a chair and continued speaking, "My father was a rich man like them. The only difference was that he was honest, while they were not. They became jealous of his progress and killed him when I was three. They took away all our property and compelled us to move in here in this small house."

He paused to sit back with his head hanging down. Dr. Sharma was listening to him while Rohan quietly muddled with his laptop.

Gazing at the floor Sumit continued, "I became an engineer and when I started working in a lab, they pulled out all funding and shut it down. My mother died under stress. And now they wanted to destroy this whole area to make a mall. How can I let that happen? How can I let those devils enjoy while I suffer?"

"So you decided to murder them. This is unacceptable. But you still have time. Terminate the remaining stock of e-coli," said Dr. Sharma.

*Sumit laughed louder,
"No one can catch me.
My revenge will be
complete. Bansal would
be dead by now and I will
die satisfied and happy.
The e-coli are already in
his and my blood. Tell the
world that it is safe from
those evil spirits."*

"Terminate!" Sumit laughed out loud, "My mission is to terminate those devils and you cannot stop me."

Dr. Sharma spoke in an intimidating tone, "We have informed the police and they would be here anytime now. So you have no choice but to surrender." As he said this, the police arrived and Rohan gestured them to arrest Sumit.

Sumit laughed louder, "No one can catch me. My revenge will be complete. Bansal would be dead by now and I will die satisfied and happy. The e-coli are already in his and my blood. Tell the world that it is safe from those evil spirits."

Rohan said, "I don't know about Mr. Bansal but certainly you are not going anywhere but jail."

Dr. Sharma and Sumit turned towards him and Rohan continued, "The control programme of e-coli was in your laptop and now the virus has taken over it. The e-coli dose which you took has been disabled."

Dr. Sharma lauded, "Good job Rohan. At least we could save one patient!"

Rohan grinned and Dr. Sharma shook hands. The ravings of Sumit faded as the police took him away.

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