



Ashok Kumar was burned by electric wires. A hospital sent him away, he says, because it had no beds. He then turned to a candy maker for treatment. *JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

In New Delhi, a Candy Shop Becomes a Burn Ward

Desperate for Relief, City's Injured Poor
Line Up for a Candy Maker's Secret Ointment

By **JESSE PESTA** and
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NEW DELHI—Bare electrical wires seared Ashok Kumar's chest while he worked on a rooftop.

It "seemed like a bolt of lightning struck me," the lanky day laborer said. Friends raced him to a hospital, Mr. Kumar said, but there were no beds available.

So instead, he sought treatment from a candy maker.

One Tuesday earlier this year, Mr. Kumar was among dozens of people visiting a tiny, filthy, one-room clinic at the north edge of the Indian capital to receive its free burn treatment. There, a secret-recipe ointment is cooked up in the kitchen of a candy shop across the street.



Mahinder, injured in a gas leak, awaits treatment in front of a poster of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, and a potato-chip poster used as a window curtain. The green tub to his right holds a supply of the ointment. JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

A volunteer with a paintbrush picked up rags from a pile on the floor, slathered them with the milky goo—which is prepared according to a recipe from a Hindu holy man—and applied them to the wounds of Mr. Kumar and others. The blood of waiting patients dripped on the floor.

The man behind the remedy, a candy maker in his

mid-sixties named Jawahar, said his goal is to help the poor. “After all, they don’t have many people to turn to,” he said. (Mr. Jawahar uses a single name, as do many of his clinic’s patients.)

The popularity of his clinic exposes a failure of India’s health-care system. The country has a shortage of facilities and one of the world’s lowest rates of health-care spending as a proportion of gross domestic product. World Bank figures show that India is outspent by Afghanistan, Botswana and Cambodia, among others.



Mr. Lal treats Upasna, a two-year-old girl who was burned by acid, while her parents hold her.

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A health-ministry official said this month the new government is preparing an “ambitious” plan to provide free insurance and medical care to India’s “poor and downtrodden.” However, the scale of the problem means any overhaul could take years.

“This is the condition of our country,” said J.L. Gupta, a surgeon and founder of the National Academy of Burns India. “People show up at a candy man for treatment. This is appalling.”

Dr. Gupta sees risky treatments like these all too regularly. He and other burn specialists describe patients who arrive in hospitals having been treated in rural areas with honey, mud, even cow dung.

At one of India’s largest state-run burn wards, a poster on the wall near the entrance says: “Do not apply any kind of toothpaste, cream, ointment, ink, potato paste, turmeric etc. to a burn.” A physician nearby explained that, sadly, posters like those don’t help much, because too many patients can’t read.

That said, many of the patients who visited Mr. Jawahar’s candy shop on this particular Tuesday said they are well aware of their other options. They believe his treatment is their best bet.

At 7:45 a.m., someone was already waiting outside the candy shop—a young father holding his 18-month-old son, Shubham, who was burned when he dunked his hands into water being heated for his bath. Asked why he brought his son here, Shubham’s father said, “Everyone has heard about the candy clinic.”

Things got rolling at 8:09 a.m., when a bear of a man named Bhure Lal, the volunteer who applies the burn treatment to patients, strolled up the middle of the street and said his hellos.

The sweets shop sits on the corner of a small, leafy park. Patients are treated across the lane in a one-room concrete building.

A 2-year-old girl named Kuhu, burned by hot tea, was an early patient. Her grandmother, Devki, said she brought her here because she herself was treated by the candy man three years earlier.

Ms. Devki held out her scarred arm. “Look now, my hand is completely healed,” she said.

Ms. Devki came here for her own burned arm, she

said, after being told at a hospital that amputation was a possibility. “I ran away from the hospital. I ran for my life,” she said.

Anyway, she said, hospitals are too crowded. “Why should we go there in the first place?”

The clinic filled up. There was Ansh, 18 months old, burned by hot milk, and Mahinder, 29, injured in a gas leak. To relieve the pain, Mr. Mahinder stood with his bloodied arm resting on top of his head.



Renu Devi was burned by a gas leak in her home, along with her sons. *JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Just before 10 a.m., in rapid succession, two little girls arrived whose parents gave startling explanations for choosing the candy clinic over hospitals. In both cases, the parents said, hospitals had accused them of injuring their children on purpose.

One girl was 6-year-old Aksha, burned when her

skirt caught fire from a leaf pile, according to her mother, Sahila. “Her entire body from her waist down was on fire,” she said.

Ms. Sahila said the staff at the hospital disbelieved her story, and told her: “You must have burned her on purpose.”



Jawahar in his candy shop

The other girl, 2-year-old Upasna, was injured, her parents said, when children playing in their neighbor’s home toppled a bottle of a powerful acid used to clear drain pipes.

Both families denied intentionally injuring their daughters. Mr. Lal, the clinic volunteer, said injuries that appear criminal are turned away.

Aksha’s mother said she also tried a private clinic. India’s private medical facilities often provide high-quality care but can be costlier, whereas government hospitals are largely free.

To pay for a few months of private care, the family borrowed 90,000 rupees (\$1,415). “It’ll take an entire lifetime to pay that back,” Ms. Sahila said. Her husband, a tailor, earns a few thousand rupees a month.

This is how she ended up at the candy man. “It’s no hospital, but the treatment seems better than any,” Ms. Sahila said.

Mr. Jawahar, the owner of the candy store and patron of the clinic, himself was burned as a child a

half-century ago. Sitting in front of his sweets shop, he rolled up his pants leg, exposing the scar. His father treated him with the holy man's ointment, a mixture of sesame oil and a pungent spice boiled and filtered, over and over, until it turns milky white.

After he was healed, Mr. Jawahar said, "People came from far and wide."



Vegetable-market worker Gulfam pedals away from the candy clinic with his wife and two children in the back of a bicycle-cart. JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Around noon, a beautician with bandaged feet arrived for treatment. So did a boy named Raj, shoved onto a smoldering pile of trash. And a homemaker, scalded by tea after being hit by a delivery boy's carelessly tossed newspaper.

Mr. Kumar, the day laborer with the chest burns, pedaled up on a bicycle. Wrapped mummy-like in bandages, the 26-year-old had been coming daily for treatment—an hour-long ride, one way.

Mr. Lal, the volunteer with the paintbrush, treated them all. He jokingly referred to Mr. Kumar, who is extremely slender, as “the wrestler.” He alternately terrified and teased the children, occasionally getting them to laugh even as they cried from pain.

Then, shortly before he started packing up for the day, Mr. Lal mentioned why he volunteers here. Six years ago, he said, his 18-year-old daughter was burned in a dowry dispute. Dowry, in which a bride’s family makes payments to a groom’s family, is illegal but widely practiced, and disputes occasionally turn violent.

His daughter eventually died. But while she was alive, she came to the candy clinic for treatment. That, Mr. Lal said, is what inspired him to offer his help.

“I see my daughter when I look at the people who line up here,” he said. “If we can’t help such people, what good are we to the world?”

At 3:05 p.m., the day’s final visitor came and went—a man who asked Mr. Lal to fill a plastic bottle with a scoop of ointment so he could send it to his brother in a distant village.

Mr. Lal obliged, then padlocked the door.



The day's final visitor