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HEALTH LIFESTYLE

Digital Health: A Mission To Enable Every Person To Access Safe, Digital Primary Care

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For Ayushman Bharat, which is set to enable every person to access safe, digital primary care, it is a must to make sure no misuse of the scheme, writes ANJAN BOSE.

The Prime Minister, during his independence day speech, formally launched the world's largest Government-funded healthcare programme, the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Abhiyan (also referred to as Ayushman Bharat) and also pointed out how technology would play a critical role in driving this scheme. Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave the nation a much-awaited gift that will act as a principle vehicle to transform the overall healthcare system of the country.

The scheme is set to be rolled out by September 25 in several States and is now going through pilot phase in six to seven States. Arguably, a foolproof technology-driven network can ensure transparency and accountability and identify those who are genuine and needy. Around 50 crore beneficiaries are expected to get coverage from the scheme that will provide them with quality treatment and care.



The Indian healthcare sector aspires to provide quality healthcare to all. To meet the enormous scope for efficient healthcare management, digital health can play a very crucial role. The integration of technology and health services in the form of digital health is the key pillar with which healthcare services delivery and management can be made more efficient.

According to NATHEALTH's Aarogya Bharat Report, non-communicable diseases will cost India \$6.2 trillion by 2030. Hence, India's unique needs drive priorities for healthcare technologies. Some of the many priorities are: increasing affordability through low-cost products and services, overcoming access barriers and engaging patients through digital health, enhancing care across the continuum through the use of information technology.

There are several areas where digital technologies can act as great enablers. First, the healthcare sector will be able to manage fraud, waste and abuse efficiently. In a system like Ayushman Bharat, digital will play a big role along with analytics in ensuring that right patients are given the right amount of care and there is no misuse of the scheme.

Second, technology can play a significant role in the procurement and commissioning of services. With the roll out of the Goods and Services Tax and other policy reforms, India is now on the path of a new indirect tax regime but it is essentially technology that will play a big role in making the supply chain much more efficient.

Today, our country has the record of the highest penetration of smartphones in the world. With increased accessibility of Aadhaar card, UID as also smartphone users, digital holds the key to transform the way India looks at population health dynamics. So, what will happen as a result of this deep penetration? Our understanding of population health dynamics and disease progression will certainly get better. Hence, taking proactive steps towards awareness building as well as chronic disease management will become much more relevant with a digital infrastructure.

Building IT-enabled electronic health records (EHR) and patient databases will improve integrated care and population health. Concentrating on regional initiatives using mobile and internet strategies, such as telemedicine, doctors on call and remote patient monitoring, can help improve access to healthcare.

It is widely admitted that scaling up digital health can lower cost and improve health outcomes and these two components are perfectly aligned with affordable and quality care. However, for accessibility, the Indian healthcare sector needs to invest in an IT backbone and interoperability standards.

Today, lack of standardisation in healthcare is one of the biggest challenges. Digital will be one of the big drivers in creation of a standardised healthcare ecosystem in the country. India has the backbone to support the digital health growth. The Public Private Partnership model needs to be adapted to roll out high impact public health interventions ensuring access in underserved areas and to the disadvantaged, which can be captured and used in healthcare information to improve quality and digital technology to increase access and lower cost.

Through the use of technology, rural-urban gap can be bridged. Telemedicine, that includes tele-consultations, doctor on call, teleradiology centres and e-ICUs can be of great benefit. E-Health centers are being successfully run in the country by a few healthcare service providers. Further, patient monitoring can be digitalised by self-testing, basic treatment at home, tracking and monitoring of health related data.

Going forward, India needs to put in place a robust policy framework to regulate, develop and deploy digital health across the continuum of care. NATHEALTH has urged the Government to set up a regulatory authority to govern and monitor digital health. The Government even announced setting up a National Digital Health Authority (NDHA) in its National Health Policy 2017. In view of Ayushman Bharat mission, it is high time for the sector to have such a regulator. Ayushman Bharat needs to fully integrate digital technologies which have all required performance attributes of awareness, accessibility and affordability. Digital health has become really vital for universal healthcare and a healthy India.

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