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The way forward for Healthcare sector in India

17 December 2018 | Features | By Dr. Alok Roy

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As an experienced practitioner of medicine and a seasoned healthcare administrator, I have been keenly observing the change in the levels of awareness among the general public regarding health and the developing trends in the areas of effective and affordable healthcare delivery. The healthcare scenario in the country today, points towards an increasing awareness of diseases and their treatment, but shows very little understanding of the importance of wellness. However, being an optimist, I believe the time is near when more and more people will begin to understand that even an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Technology-led Innovations: As all other fields, information technology (IT) is making giant inroads into Healthcare as well. Commercialisation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be seen in the rapid incorporation of new applications in different areas of treatment and care. Technology is playing a significant role in making treatment less painful, time-saving and affordable. No one can deny that the Internet of Things (IoT) is the future of healthcare. Artificial intelligence and data analytics are bringing greater opportunities for the sector, offering faster, more effective treatment options that have wider affordability and acceptability. Robotics too has played a large role in improving the quality of care for patients. Robotic surgeries, radiation surgery or radio therapies with cyber knife options, and transplant support systems, among other facilities, are likely to see further advancements.

Technology led innovations in healthcare are bound to open doors to a newer, braver world where healthcare is much more accessible and affordable. This is particularly true for a country like India which shows a dismal ratio of 0.7 doctors, and 1.5 nurses per 1,000 patients. Here technology is playing a big role in aiding diagnosis and remote monitoring of patients through means like telemedicine, electronic ICU, etc.

Enabling Policies --100% FDI in Hospitals, Private Equity and Venture Capital Investments: An investor looking to invest in healthcare in India can be heartened by the Government's move of opening its shores to dollar money. With a liberal foreign direct investment (FDI) policy for hospitals, we are looking at the prospect of foreign investors taking controlling stakes in our hospitals. Currently, 100 percent FDI is allowed in hospitals under the automatic route. This is likely to generate a lot of traction in this space in the near future.

Private-equity funds, generalist asset managers, tech-focused funds, and corporate buyers too seem to be finding this space attractive lately. A decade ago, only a few private-equity houses had dedicated health-care teams, but the scenario has undergone a sea change with investment in healthcare having become a lucrative prospect.

Shift towards Generic Medicines: The recent trend of moving towards generic drugs among healthcare providers, is very encouraging both from the point of view of the domestic pharma companies and the patient, the end user, who is likely to gain from the increased cost effectiveness. Indian pharma companies have proven time and again that they are good at manufacturing low cost generic drugs that can benefit the patient, and make treatment more viable.

Medical Tourism: Statistics have shown that over 3.5 lakh people from different countries visit India every year as our hospitals offer advanced, yet cost-effective medical care that is qualitatively at par with the best in the world. The medical tourism market in India has seen a growth of 22-25% from 2014. An increase that can be attributed to the major advancements in healthcare delivery that has been seen in our country in the recent years, coupled with the rising cost of medical treatment in developed countries. India's medical tourism industry is expected to grow to around $8 billion industry by 2020 from the current $3 billion. Given this scenario, it is safe to predict that India is set to become the hub for medical tourism in the very near future.

Ayushman Bharat: Ayushman Bharat, also referred to as 'Modicare', is a flagship National Health Protection Scheme initiative that will greatly impact the uplift of our country's healthcare delivery system if implemented well. The Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) is a big step forward in providing universal health coverage on an unprecedented scale. Contrary to the general perception, private hospitals have started to participate in this project, albeit gradually. Though a number of key implementation issues have been ironed out, a few challenges still remain, but the Government is taking stock of them actively. The scheme is a huge positive for the country's healthcare and pharmaceutical industries. It is one move that is likely to open the path of reaching quality care to the masses, even to the remotest corners of the country. It will also create more job opportunities and give a boost to the country's economic growth. Ayushman Bharat is likely to mark a new era in public healthcare delivery. Given the complexity and vastness of our population matrix, we need more such patient centric reforms which would bring a greater number of people into the ambit of primary healthcare.

Non-communicable Diseases: In the coming years India's biggest challenge is likely to be the explosion of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like diabetes, heart conditions, alzheimer's asthma and blood pressure. As per a World Economic Forum (WEF) report, the cost burden of NCDs will be around $30 trillion worldwide by 2030, and for India alone it will be around Rs 4.8 trillion - 50 per cent of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). We may be looking at the alarming

prospect of even15-year-olds becoming victims of heart attacks by 2022!

Managing Cost & Multiple Demands: Managing cost effectively without compromising on quality care is one of the most important agendas for healthcare providers today. Particularly in times when sustainability for private healthcare depends on a number of external factors and operational challenges which include meeting regulatory compliances, demands of the customers and financial viability.

Conclusion: India has always been known to have some of the finest practitioners of medicine, but earlier healthcare was limited to treatment of diseases with very little or no attention paid to prevention of illness. The mindset towards care of health is fortunately changing with various organizations focusing more on wellness. The healthcare institutions have a very important role to play here, they need to find the perfect balance between best clinical treatment, quality care and excellence in patient experience. We need to remember that the patients are the most important stakeholders in the chain, as they are the end users who deserve to lead a healthy, fulfilling life. I see a good health future for our country with happier, fitter citizens.

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