BioSpectrum
the business of Bi
24 years of leveraging the business of Bio
www.biospectrumindia.co

COVID-19 has set a new benchmark for telemedicine industry in India: Dr Rishi Bhatnagar

05 May 2020 | Interviews

Dr Rishi Bhatnagar, President, Aeris India talks about the telemedicine trend amidst COVID-19



In your opinion, how is technology being leveraged in India in the health space?

Registered Medical Practitioner (RMP) Accessibility as per the WHO standards has been a persistent problem of the Indian healthcare sector. The country has a basic need for increased number of qualified medical doctors, with only one government doctor for every 10,189 people. It also needs an additional 18.8m ancillary workers such as nurses and technicians for the operating theatre, radiology and dialysis to meet the growing demand for accessible healthcare. Technology and innovation being the ray of hope in the health space which is also witnessing a paradigm shift with the advent of Telemedicine, which essentially means the use of digital technologies for data collection and bridging the information gap to provide and support healthcare services when distance separates the participants.

Driven by the accelerated rate of technology adoption in the country, Telemedicine is a promising way forward for improved medical care at both rural and semi urban regions in the country. And the Indian government is taking positive measures at both adoption and opportunity creation for a robust digital infrastructure as well as policy frameworks. NITI Aayog launched the National Health Stack (NHS) which is a virtual digital platform for healthcare in the country. NHS study aims to have digital health records for all citizens by 2022 to make telemedicine and E-Health easy.

In fact, more than ever, we are realizing the imperative of technology in social service delivery. The health space is one of the most promised sectors for the Internet of Things as the accessibility to data helps in more effective and quality care of the patients. Right from telemedicine, remote patient monitoring and elderly care to dealing with mental wellbeing, technology can improve the quality of healthcare for everyone in India. Deeper penetration of smartphones and mobile apps, ubiquitous last mile connectivity, cloud storage, faster processing speeds and cheaper data plans along with recent advances in 3G to 5G technology have buoyed the use of telemedicine solutions. The technology can also be leveraged in timely results of diagnoses that are more accurate, treatments more targeted, and serious conditions that can be detected earlier. Conducting remote surgeries has become a reality with advance technologies. These advancements are not only reducing the overall cost but are also improving the patient recovery time by eliminating the need for hospital stays. These developments have generated confidence in connected healthcare devices and mHealth tools, growing in popularity with patients and caregivers, as well as with doctors, pharmacies, and insurance departments.

How has Telemedicine been utilised in India in current scenario?

In the current scenario, telemedicine and telehealth is perhaps the cheapest, as well as the fastest way to not only bridge the rural–urban health divide especially during the Covid-19 crisis. I am happy to see the recent framework drafted by Indian government which has buoyed the use of telemedicine solutions to fight the novel coronavirus. On March 26, 2020 the health ministry issued telemedicine guidelines enabling doctors to write prescriptions based on telephone conversations that reduce risks of transmission for medical professionals as well as patients. It also reduces the inconvenience/impact to family and

caregivers and social factors. Virtual visits enabled through telemedicine would prove very effective and helpful.

For frontline physicians, telehealth is primarily a way to perform Covid-19 and other urgent-care screenings. Doctors can check the symptoms in patients through tele-conferencing, advise them about medication, precautions as well as tests required and refer them to a healthcare facility in case their symptoms aggravate. Arrangements can also be made for pathologists to be able to collect samples from home.

Role of tele health providing healthcare services in rural areas/dense population areas?

Telemedicine has made geographical boundaries redundant – healthcare workers using this technology have a wider and deeper reach to every smart village and town in the country where the digital infrastructure is in place.

Telemedicine is already providing a proactive approach to helping patients in rural and remote areas, especially in the government run programs. Hundreds of thousands of SMSs are sent every day by government health departments, NGOs and the private sector are ensuring better adherence and compliance be it for immunisation, vaccination, ante natal counselling, or blood sugar evaluation. Medical Call centres are providing authenticated validated health information through mobile phones. Thousands of health “apps” can now be downloaded. Video Conferences with RMPs through mobiles, using 3G & 4G is on the rise.

Taking the telemedicine route, patients can have access to improved health outcomes and quality of life with real-time support closer to their home. While telemedicine is already playing a great role in critical care monitoring where it is not possible to transfer the patient, extensively using telemedicine in peripheral health set-ups can significantly reduce the time and costs of patient transportation from remote regions to the urban centres. Timely interventions with telemedicine is reducing the burden on poor patients to travel miles for getting medical attention and diagnostics while also ensuring that only those patients are hospitalised which need critical care.

How do you predict the role of telemedicine in future?

The telemedicine market in India is expected to reach US$5.4 Bn by 2025 with a CAGR of 31%. The future of Telemedicine will not be limited to remote consulting, it has a variety of applications in patient care, education, research, administration and public health. With success of public and private partnership models in creating telemedicine centres in few states in India, we see more such partnerships emerging across the country. The next set of investments would be required in making tele-mentored procedures-surgery using hand robots in every district.

What all trends you can predict in healthcare industry post COVID-19?

The Coronavirus has set a new benchmark for the telemedicine industry in India. Telehealth is being utilized on a scale never seen before, allowing patients to connect with medical professionals without leaving home. Practo, a digital healthcare platform has announced partnership with Thyrocare for booking Covid-19 testing online. I believe that it may soon be possible to order a COVID-19 test online, with a medical professional remotely reviewing patient symptoms.

Leading private hospitals have started experimenting with contactless patient screening and segregation of critical cases from non-critical ones, using technology. Recently a video went viral of a private hospital which stationed one humanoid robot at entrance for patient temperature monitoring and registration and another one scheduling doctor’s teleconference for screening and instant appointment booking. This trend will continue to attract investments as the technology here helps to automate a mature process, release bandwidth of staff and prevents healthcare support services providers from coming in direct contact with infected patients.

The post covid-19 era would also see telemedicine playing a critical role in disease surveillance and program tracking. The data produced at telemedicine centres will play an essential role in early detection of infected clusters of population, quicker isolation and dissemination of required resources for relief for arresting spread with proactive prevention and control mechanisms. The data will also help in defining more pragmatic strategies and policies for disease prevention and control.