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"Entry of pharma companies & large corporate chain hospitals into diagnostics is expanding the sector in India"

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In conversation with Dr Sandeep Sewlikar, Head - Medical and Scientific Affairs, Roche Diagnostics India, Mumbai



Roche Diagnostics recently organised their proprietary event RED, which covered topics ranging from testing efficiency in the laboratory to the broader topic of healthcare trends and landscape. What is your take on the current challenges facing the diagnostics market in India?

The pandemic and its aftermath are still challenging us. The entire healthcare sector has never been so on the edge. There is a huge responsibility on us to help expedite access to screening, diagnosis, treatment including critical care and immunization. The new variant of the SARS CoV-2 was identified because of continuous surveillance.

Other challenges for us in India are to lower healthcare spending on diagnostics, lower reimbursement coverage and low number of accredited labs. However, RT-PCR has become colloquial and amongst clinicians, the awareness about different biomarkers such as D-dimer, IL-6, Ferritin that have uses beyond COVID-19 management, is increasing & our system rose to provide last mile coverage in tough times.

However, we need to ensure that focus on other diseases like cancer, HIV, TB, Dengue etc does not get diminished. As we have been thinking almost exclusively about COVID-19 in the last 1.5 years, care for these other diseases has been forced on the back burner. An important next step will be to not only bring back care to the pre-pandemic levels but to apply the learnings and utilize the infrastructure from the pandemic to create a successful, vibrant and agile healthcare system.

The sector is facing a huge challenge in terms of delivering quality and timely diagnosis that greatly hinders the prospect of positive patient outcomes. Advanced and good quality diagnostics should be a right and not a privilege based on geography, socioeconomic status etc.

In your opinion, has the pandemic opened our eyes to the need for early stage diagnosis in disease management or is this only w.r.t COVID-19 management? What are the changes that you foresee in the diagnostic sector in 2022?

We are now witnessing an increased adoption of diagnostics in clinical management and increased understanding from the public as well. Healthcare sector understood the value of diagnostics in the current pandemic. This should lead to the realization of the value of diagnostics beyond just diagnosis and routine lab tests, for patient care. Although this trend can be easily noticed in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, we hope it has a cascading impact on other disease management verticals. Years of sustained efforts have led to realizing the value of screening (for example - in cervical cancer). So also, the value of early diagnosis has been long undermined. However, it can be hoped that the pandemic has had a positive effect on this realization.

Today people are more conscious about lifestyle diseases like diabetes type 2, cardiovascular diseases, and are not hesitant in getting tests done in order to avoid them. This pandemic made us realize even advanced tests and technologies like PCR could become commonplace and accessible to a large population. Availability of PCR platforms in the country, will lead to

adoption of clinically validated molecular tests in other disease areas like cervical cancer screening and tuberculosis diagnostics.

The diagnostic industry is one of the fastest expanding service verticals in the country at the moment being pegged at a valuation of $9.5 billion and is expected to grow at ~11% CAGR over the next five years. Fueled by a shift in mindset towards disease awareness and management, there will be a huge pressure on the sector to innovate to meet the high demand that will follow. We are also witnessing the expansion of the diagnostics industry as pharmaceutical companies and large corporate chain hospitals are entering into diagnostics as innovators and/or laboratory service providers, enabling access pan India.

According to McKinsey, the economic benefits from health improvements are substantial enough to add $12 trillion or 8 percent to global GDP in 2040, which translates into 0.4 percent faster growth every year. These benefits arise through the labour market, both by expanding future employment through fewer early deaths, fewer health conditions, and higher labor-force participation of healthier people and through the productivity gains achievable by workers who are physically and cognitively healthier.

How vital is the relationship between government & private bodies in disease management?

Now more than ever, the role of the government is highlighted in matters pertaining to Disease Management via their Public Health Policies & Infrastructure. It is the government that sets the pace for the industry to follow suit through their expenditure plans for safe and accessible care. We are seeing encouraging signs of increased government health expenditure. Government can scale up the screening and diagnostics projects through public-private partnership, thus improving diagnostics infrastructure and enabling access to quality diagnostics for masses.

Roche Diagnostics invests heavily into R&D thereby bringing revolutionary innovations in high medical value diagnostics tests, to address the unmet patient needs that ultimately help in reducing disease burden. Such advanced diagnostics help in scaling up screening or diagnostic programmes undertaken by the government.

In India, we collaborate with various state governments such as Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir to support their mass screening mandates.

How can we improve access to diagnostics for those who need it the most? What is Roche doing to support the same?

The pandemic has shown that all private sector members of the healthcare sector, from hospitals and pharma companies to diagnostics labs, met the need of the hour while safeguarding the health and safety of their workers. At Roche Diagnostics, we are determined to accelerate our efforts to work with institutional bodies and other government stakeholders on driving awareness on how we can support their efforts in disease management and eradication. As you know, infectious disease is an area of special focus for us; we will also continue to innovate and bring superior products which will address the increasing healthcare demands through laboratory innovations that optimize workflow, reduce inefficiencies, expedite clinical decision making and provide an opportunity to scale up.

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