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"We are working towards launching tests for detecting infectious diseases even during periods of low viral load"

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The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way that people think about communicable diseases. However, reducing India's burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) is probably what requires more focus right now. For instance, there have been reports of post-pandemic medications and vaccine side effects that affect young people with cardiovascular diseases. Now that a new variant is in the air, the industry needs to gear up with effective diagnostic measures in 2023. To learn more about the new trends in the diagnostic sector, BioSpectrum India interacted with Narendra Varde, Managing Director, Roche Diagnostics India & Neighbouring Markets.



What new trends do you foresee in the Indian diagnostic space in 2023?

India’s diagnostic industry is experiencing strong growth, driven by increased awareness of preventive health and the greater burden of NCDs both of which are fueling the preventive healthcare segment. People are opting for early wellness testing to improve long-term health outcomes, aid in disease management, and lower the costs of future treatment. Having said that there are some trends that I think will define 2023:

Diagnostics to be more accessible: We will surely witness more equitable access to advanced diagnostics in tier II and III cities. Quality diagnostics services will no longer be the exclusive domain of city dwellers; various developments will reduce the distance between patients and point-of-care (POC). Roche Diagnostics has a footprint across 450 cities in India, creating opportunities in far-flung corners of the country and expanding access to novel biomarkers for which people need not come to large city laboratories any longer. Furthermore, the introduction of the National Essential Diagnostics List (NEDL) has also helped in guiding policymakers in determining which diagnostics tests are needed across the different healthcare facilities of the nation.

Consolidation will benefit patients: The diagnostic sector in India is highly fragmented, with standalone centers accounting for 45-50% of the market, organized chain accounting for less than 35%, and hospital-based diagnostic centers accounting for the remainder. According to reports, the industry will see consolidation, with several small and independent labs becoming franchisees for the larger players. Private diagnostic chains are expected to lead and enjoy market share gains bolstered by their superior quality services and wide test menu.
Increased competition from online aggregators will, in turn, offer tests at lower prices, resulting in benefits to patients.

Digitalisation of Health Data: In the coming year, it will be interesting to see how the government’s initiative of digitalizing the nation’s health records would turn out. It has been said that more than 4 crore people have digitalized their health records with Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission. It means that these people have linked their health records with their ABHA accounts digitally. Now, these people will be able to access and manage these records at per convenience. At the same time, India Association has taken a revolutionary step by introducing a 'Digital Health Registry. This will enable health facilities, hospitals, clinics, diagnostic laboratories, and, imaging centers, to get connected to India's digital health ecosystem and allow their listing on a national platform.

What new launches are in the pipeline for 2023 for the Indian market at Roche Diagnostics?

We are committed to bringing world-class, cutting-edge products to India. 2023 is not going to be any different. Over the last 2 years, we introduced an extended range of COVID-19 tests in India to help tackle the pandemic. We were the world’s first

company to introduce the RT-PCR test for COVID-19. We will continue our work of educating the clinician and laboratory fraternity about our new and advanced biomarkers and products where we now have claim extensions. Particularly relevant for countries like India which has a huge burden of cardiovascular disease (CVD) incidence, our cardiac biomarkers will drive early detection of heart failure and accurate diagnosis of cardiac injury. Our newly launched CSF assay will facilitate early diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, leading to better disease management. Our solutions in Digital Pathology will further improve access to personalised healthcare through remote pathology in rural geographies. We are also working towards launching tests for infectious diseases that can facilitate detection even during periods of low viral load.

Focusing on the newly launched CSF assay that will facilitate early diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, what is the progress on this?

A huge challenge in Alzheimer's disease is early and accurate detection. According to a 2020 report by the Alzheimer's and Related Disorders Society of India (ARDSI), an estimated 5.3 million people above the age of 60 have dementia in the country and the burden of Alzheimer's is expected to increase in the coming years.

Our Elecsys CSF assays are intended for use in adult patients to aid in the early diagnosis of AD as well as in the identification of those with a higher risk of cognitive decline. Considering the novelty of this assay, we are working with medical professionals to increase awareness of the assay as well as educate them about the need for accurate diagnosis that rests on parameters that extend beyond cognitive symptoms. We are also launching public service awareness campaigns to create greater awareness of AD among the elderly and their caregivers.

What initiatives are being taken by Roche Diagnostics to amplify cancer treatment in India?

Roche has been developing innovative diagnostics and therapies with the goal to transform cancer care in India. We are the market leader in Tissue Diagnostics and work with major oncology care institutes including the tata memorial chain of hospitals enabling cancer care diagnostics not only in tertiary care settings but also in secondary care and in rural geographies to be closer to patients.

Roche's innovative technologies such as next-generation sequencing, liquid biopsies, and artificial intelligence-powered image analysis algorithms are facilitating evolution in personalized healthcare. Our solutions in Digital Pathology will further improve access to personalized diagnosis through remote pathology in rural geographies. Our portfolio of VENTANA and BenchMark products offers prompt, precise cytology and tissue-based results so pathologists, physicians, and patients can make confident clinical management and treatment decisions. Similarly, our histology equipment features next-generation immunohistochemistry (IHC) and in situ hybridization (ISH) staining platforms; plus, highly sensitive detection kits, probes, and Companion diagnostic assays.

In fact, we have recently launched our next-generation VENTANA DP 600 slide scanner in India. This high-capacity slide scanner produces excellent image quality of stained histology slides from patient tissue samples while providing ease of use and workflow flexibility for the pathology lab. Now, the VENTANA DP 600 slide scanner is an important tool in the advancement of personalized healthcare. In combination with our innovative AI image analysis algorithms, this solution can help ensure that each patient receives the most effective treatment plan possible. It also creates opportunities for better collaboration and remote diagnosis, which can be lifesaving in areas with limited access to pathologists.

Another step in advancing cancer diagnostics in India is the launch of the AVENIO Tumor Tissue Comprehensive Genomic Profiling (CGP) Kit, jointly developed with Foundation Medicine. This kit, which is currently a prototype for research purposes only, opens doors to innovative research and precision medicine in oncology that eventually positively impacts the patient journey. Currently, most cancer samples are sent out of the country for comprehensive genomic profiling which increases the cost of these tests and takes about 15 days or more for test results. The AVENIO Tumor Tissue CGP Kit will not only improve access to advanced cancer diagnostics but also reduce costs while improving turnaround time to 5-7 days.

Talking about improving access to cancer diagnostics, I am happy to share that Roche Diagnostics has collaborated with the Director General Of Armed Forces Medical Services to enhance cancer diagnostics at 10 command hospitals across India. This will also ensure faster access to targeted treatments with the adoption of companion diagnostics for all beneficiaries of the armed services.

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