COVID-19 becomes enabler and accelerator of digital health adoption

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COVID-19 becomes enabler and accelerator of digital health adoption

By Dr. D.K. Mangal And Suryaprabha Sadasivan | Updated: April 07, 2021 17:15 IST

COVID-19 continues to impact lives across the world, hampering health equity and outcomes and creating barriers in the socio-economic growth of countries. The past year has been a testing time for the healthcare sector, to put it mildly. While the pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of our healthcare system, it also led to an unprecedented push towards the adoption of digital technologies for healthcare management and to improve the overall efficiency of healthcare delivery.

Throughout the pandemic, innovative digital solutions such as the Aarogya Setu and other contact-tracing apps, telemedicine services, smart devices for healthcare monitoring, robotics, and Artificial Intelligence-enabled support for patient care, and most recently, the Co-WIN app for India's vaccination drive have anchored our response to the public health needs. These have also reiterated the role of technology in strengthening our health systems.

Traditionally, our healthcare system has been marred by several challenges. Some of the barriers to equitable access to health have been inefficient and inconsistently available healthcare facilities, shortage of trained and qualified healthcare professionals, low healthcare expenditure of the government, poor data collection, lack of technology adoption, and upgradation, among others.

Over time, it has become evident that these gap areas cannot be addressed through a linear approach and that convergence and adoption of digital technologies will be the only enabler of improved healthcare delivery, access, and patient care in the future of Indian healthcare system. One of the biggest challenges faced by the healthcare industry is the ability to consistently deliver high-quality patient care, regardless of their location. There is growing evidence of successful adoption of AI and the Internet of Medical Things (IoMT) for optimum utilisation of resources, improved health care delivery and operational excellence, enhanced patient experience as well as outcomes. These emerging technologies have proven to effectively support chronic disease management through real-time monitoring, drug management, improving the efficacy of medical staff, patients, and inventory tracking, enabling options for remote health monitoring among others.

With increasing internet access and digital literacy across urban and rural settings, we have seen a growing appetite for technology-enabled healthcare solutions among the different stakeholders in the sector. Even before the onset of COVID-19, the government has shown its intent to bolster its healthcare access, delivery, and outcomes by effectively leveraging technology through the National Digital Health Mission (NDHM). As part of this, the government aims to roll out initiatives such as the Electronic Medical Records (EMR), Health Facility Registry (HFR), Digi Doctor, Health ID among others to make healthcare efficient, accessible, inclusive, affordable, and safe. However, even today, technology adoption has been largely driven by the private sector as compared to public healthcare sector.

For the development and adoption of emerging technologies to reimagine the future of healthcare in India, there is still a long road ahead. Firstly, what you do not understand, you do not adopt. Therefore, besides improving access to digital infrastructure, enabling digital literacy of people, including healthcare professionals, is crucial. Secondly, there is a huge opportunity to increase collaboration between the government and the private sector to promote the development and adoption of emerging technologies in different areas of the healthcare sector. Thirdly, there is a need for better mechanisms to be put in place for data collection and data sharing without compromising privacy and security. The surveillance of communicable diseases and risk factors of non-communicable diseases should be integrated in the health management information system. Lastly, there is a need to incentivize stakeholders to actively participate in the digital transformation of our health systems. This can be done only by increasing investments in emerging technologies by allocating specific budgets for it and by creating more robust frameworks for digital adoption.

Today we live in a connected world where patients are expecting better health outcomes without comprising on convenience and quality. A tech-enabled primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare system would have to strike a balance between affordability, convenience, and also on issues of safety, and security of data. This pandemic has certainly laid a strong foundation for innovation, collaboration, and the adoption of technology in both preventive and curative healthcare. For India to build a resilient and future-ready health ecosystem, there is a compelling need to re-imagine our healthcare priorities with a technology-focused lens.

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