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TeleHealth facilities Must be Leveraged to the Fullest: Coronavirus Pandemic

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Vikram Thaploo, CEO, Apollo TeleHealth talks about the role telehealth to tackle a public health crisis



The COVID 19 outbreak has brought a large part of the world to a standstill, forcing people to find remote ways of performing their daily tasks. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was said to be “tele-governing” the country in quarantine after his wife tested positive for the virus. As remote working is adopted on a large scale and workplaces open work from home alternatives in an unprecedented way, remote healthcare is another area whose use is surging.

World over, healthcare systems have reported an increase in patients opting for the telehealth route to access physician consultations. Healthcare organizations are expanding the use of telehealth to safely screen and treat patients for coronavirus, and in doing so are trying to contain the spread of infection. In the US, many AI-based telehealth services providers have reported a significant jump in the volume of virtual visits ever since the coronavirus scare caught the country. In his bid to promote the use of telehealth, US President Donald Trump announced that his administration is waiving some federal rules to make it easier for more doctors to provide care remotely using video chats and other services. At Apollo TeleHealth, we have witnessed a 100% surge in patients’ footfalls from top Tier cities over the past few days. Our telehealth centres are screening patients and offering them consultation and advice through video links.

Mainstreaming telehealth to tackle a public health crisis

Globally, as healthcare systems stand overburdened and overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the pandemic, conventional healthcare is finding it impossible to address the disaster. With hospital beds and ICUs grossly insufficient, doctors in severely-hit countries are having to choose which patient to treat and which to ‘let die’ based on the chances of their survival. In India, where healthcare systems are already overburdened, a large outbreak will spell further disaster. It is important therefore to act timely to leverage the use of alternative processes like telehealth and turn them from stop-gap arrangements to the mainstream interventions. The COVID 19 pandemic will go down in history as a turning point in the journey of telehealth, given the fact that it is the first time that the use of telehealth is being co-opted on a large scale to address a public health crisis. Telehealth will act as a major cog in the wheel of effective coronavirus management and containment.

Treating home quarantined patients and containing the spread

From testing to treating to isolating, our healthcare resources are scarce for every part of the treatment process for COVID 19. All people with symptoms can neither be tested immediately, not all of them can be admitted to hospitals. Similarly, administered quarantine facilities will also turn grossly insufficient once cases spiral to stage II. Therefore, keeping as many sick people as possible out of hospitals is a major component of managing the coronavirus. Across the world, most infected people with mild to moderate symptoms have been asked to self-quarantine themselves at home while hospitals are taking in only the seriously ill patients needing artificial respiratory support. This is where telehealth services will have to be leveraged in a major way in monitoring and advising such people.

The governments in partnership with private players must actively endorse and advertise telehealth helplines and encourage people to seek consultations through the remote mechanism. If every individual with a fever or a cough rushes to a hospital or clinic, it may wreak havoc on the healthcare system. Moreover, a number of these patients may be suffering from just the seasonal flu. Taking the telehealth route will help in filtering and shortlisting the most serious patients who need hospitalization. Doctors can check the symptoms in patients through teleconferencing and advise them about medication; precautions, as well as tests, required and refer them to a healthcare facility in case their symptoms aggravate. Arrangements must also be made for pathologists to be able to collect samples from home.

Addressing other health issues remotely

At a time when all healthcare resources have been consumed in addressing the coronavirus threat, a large number of patients with other health conditions, be it chronic diseases or acute conditions requiring medical help are at loss. Not only is their lack of resources to address their needs, but they also face the risk of contracting the dreaded infection while travelling to clinics and hospitals. Telehealth is a safe and effective route for this group of patients as well. Telehealth providers and hospitals must make specialists in different domains available to patients through telehealth services. This will ensure that patients with other health conditions requiring medical support are not ignored.